The New Criterion

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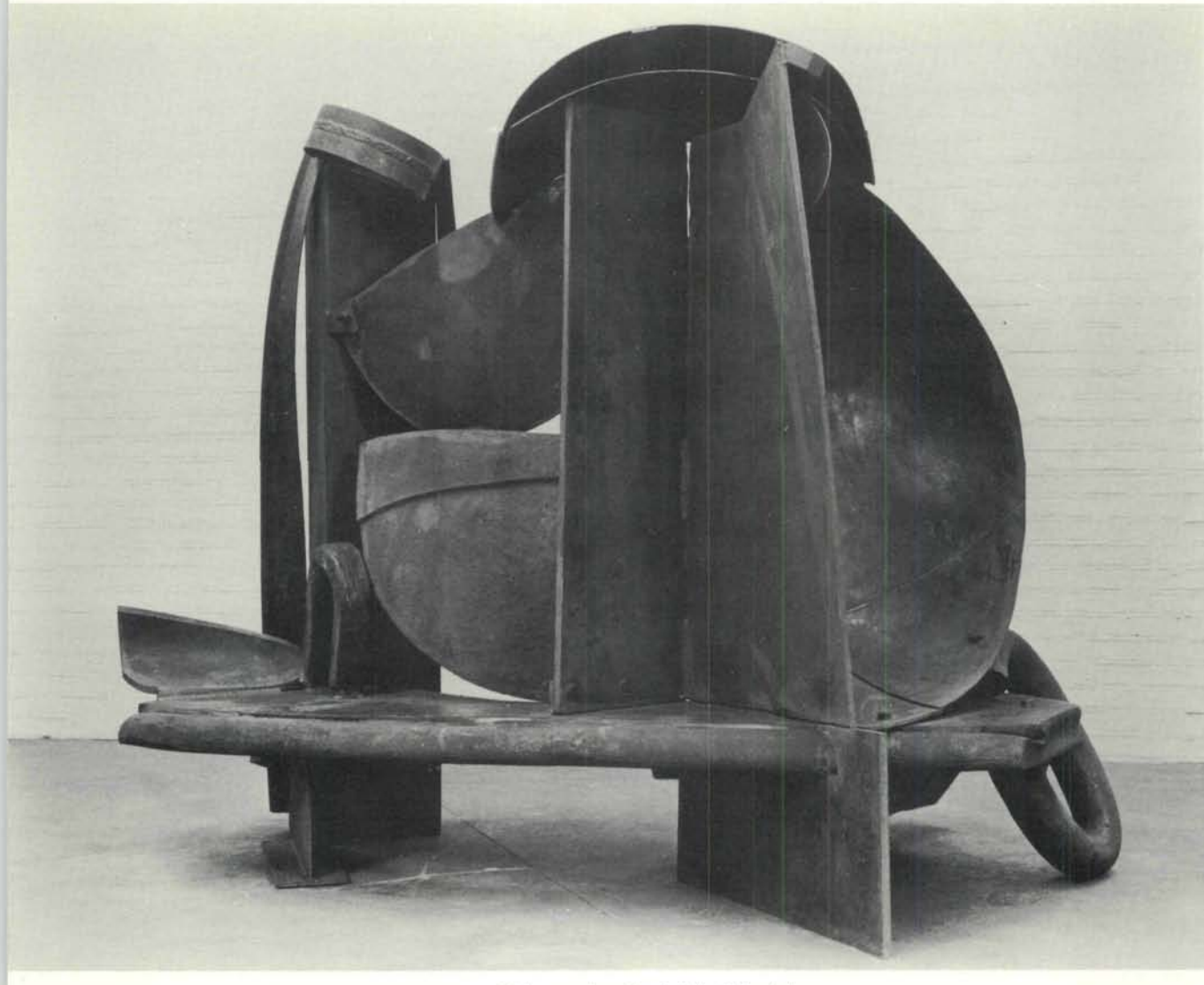

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The New Criterion *May 1984*

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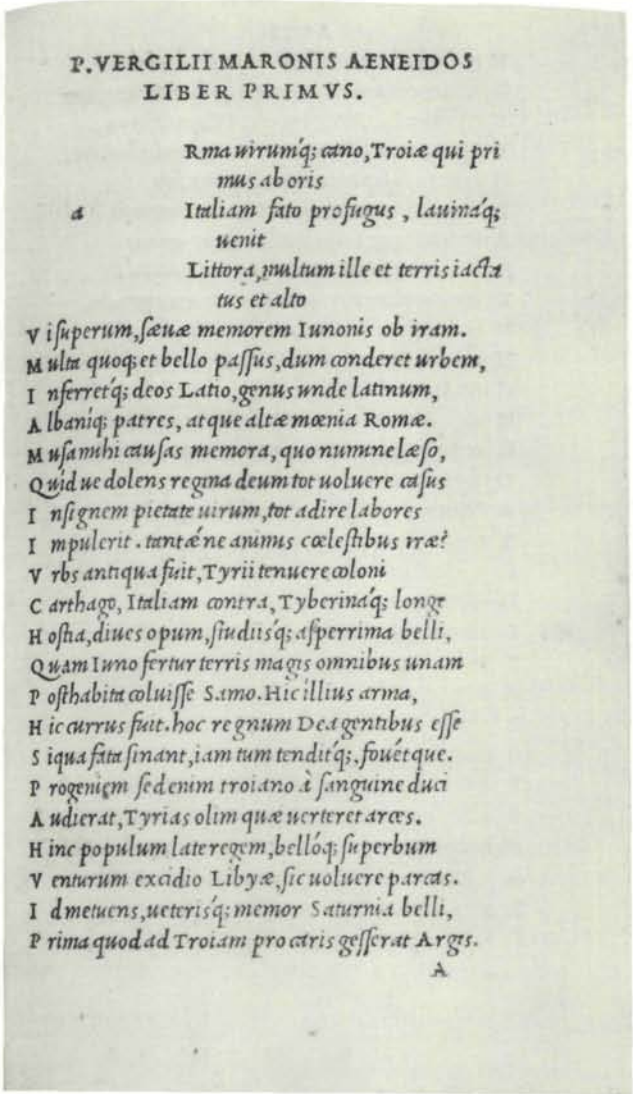

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Rma uirumq; cano, Troiæ qui primus ab oris
a Italiam fato profugus, Lauinaq; uenit
Littora, multum ille et terris iactatus et alto
V i superum, sæuæ memorem Iunonis ob iram.
M ulta quoq; et bello passus, dum conderet urbem,
I nferretq; deos Latio, genus unde latinum,
A lbaniq; patres, atque altæ mœnia Romæ.
M usa mihi causas memora, quo numine læso,
Q uid ue dolens regina deum tot uoluere casus
I nsignem pietate uirum, tot adire labores
I mpulerit. tantæne animis cœlestibus iræ?
V rbs antiqua fuit, Tyrii tenuere coloni
C arthago, Italiam contra, Tyberinaq; longe
H ostia, diues opum, studiisq; asperrima belli,
Quam Iuno fertur terris magis omnibus unam
P osthabita coluisse Samo. Hic illius arma,
H ic currus fuit. hoc regnum Dea gentibus esse
S i qua fata sinant, iam tum tenditq; fouetque.
P rogeniem sed enim troiano à sanguine duci
A udierat, Tyrias olim quæ uerteret arces.
H inc populum late regem, belloq; superbum
V enturum excidio Libyæ, sic uoluere parcas.
I dmetuens, ueteris q; memor Saturnia belli,
P rima quod ad Troiam pro caris gesserat Argis.

A

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Above:
Aldine Press, Vergil [*Opera*], Venice: Aldus Manutius, April 1501, 8vo, blue morocco gilt by C. Kalthoeber. The first book printed in italic type. The Earl Spencer—Michael Wodhull—Brayton Ives—Junius S. Morgan copy.

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Bonnard in Paris

by Hilton Kramer

That's not painting, what he does.
—Picasso on Bonnard

The great art event in Paris this spring has been the resplendent Bonnard exhibition at Beaubourg.[1] Though not an exhibition on the grand scale—it does not even attempt to give us a comprehensive account of the artist's oeuvre—it has nonetheless proved to be one of those events that stay in the mind as a major experience, continuing to reverberate in the memory as something unexpectedly weighty and profound.

Bonnard profound? Is it possible? It was not the way one was used to thinking of him. One went to this exhibition, as one had always gone to Bonnard's work, expecting pleasure; and pleasure it certainly afforded in ample measure. But added to this expected pleasure was something else—a sense of the artist's power, conviction, and authority which, for this observer at least, was something quite new. It was as if one were seeing the artist's true originality for the first time.

It was no surprise, of course, to find that Bonnard had been a wonderful painter. One hardly expected to be disappointed in this respect. Bonnard had always been pleasing to the taste, and his ability to please remained undiminished. Yet it is one of the oddities of modern cultural life that the artists who give us such prompt and unalloyed pleasure are not usually the artists who loom largest on our artistic horizon. They tend to be taken for granted. By the standards that had come to be applied to modern painting, there was thus something suspicious in Bonnard's unfailing ability to please—something that suggested timidity, perhaps, or a lack of intellectual initiative. Had he actually done anything new, or was he—as was sometimes said—only a latter-day Impressionist clinging to a moribund tradition?

Even among Bonnard's admirers there had often persisted an element of uncertainty about these matters, and thus about the size and scope of his achievement—even, perhaps, about the nature of his achievement. However much one loved his work—and something like love was what Bonnard's work usually inspired in those drawn to it—there was, all the same, a certain hesitancy

1 "Bonnard," directed by Gérard Régnier, is currently on view at the Musée nationale d'art moderne at the Pompidou Center (Beaubourg) in Paris (Feb. 23-May 21), and will then travel to the Phillips Collection in Washington (June 9-Aug. 20) and the Dallas Museum of Art (Sept. 16-Nov. 20), co-organizers of the exhibition. The exhibition catalogue (*Bonnard,* 291 pages, 170 francs), published in the lavish format of the Pompidou Center's "Classiques du XX[e] siècle" series, contains an introduction by John Russell and essays by Jean Clair, Steven A. Nash, Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, and Jean-François Chevrier, in addition to Antoine Terrasse's chronology of the artist's life, excerpts from Bonnard's notebooks, reproductions of his photographs, and extensive notes on the individual paintings.

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about placing it right up there in the front rank of the art of his time. There always remained some doubt as to whether Bonnard was really "big" enough to take his place beside the largest and most commanding talents. Too accomplished to be considered minor and yet not sufficiently imposing to be regarded as one of the greatest, Bonnard seemed to be permanently lodged in a sort of limbo of indeterminacy where our affection for his work stood guard against whatever doubts our critical faculties might be inclined to bring to it.

If the passage of time has now altered our perspective on Bonnard—as I believe it has—this undoubtedly owes much to the fact that our increasing distance from the great days of the School of Paris has had the effect of casting *all* of its myriad achievements in a new historical light. No longer are we as inclined as we once were to look upon the radical innovations of the School of Paris as constituting its most distinctive contribution to the art of the modern era. Important as these innovations were, they now look in retrospect less like ends in themselves than a means of sustaining an artistic tradition whose last glorious chapter has turned out to be the School of Paris itself.

This applies even to Cubism, the most radical of all the innovations spawned by the School of Paris—at least to Cubism as it evolved in the work of Picasso, Braque, Gris, and Léger, its originators. Far from providing an alternative to the Western pictorial tradition or a liberation from its authority—which was what Cubism did lead to when certain of its ideas were appropriated and radically transformed by the Russian avant-garde and other groups intent upon a more far-reaching revolution in art—Cubism in its classic School of Paris modality remained, on the contrary, a highly inventive means of giving that tradition another lease on life.

But such leases are, by their very nature, impermanent, and this one certainly proved to be. The tradition to which Cubism had given new life was not something that could be handed on, as it turned out, and it wasn't. It could only degenerate into a variety of *pompier* parodies of itself. In the art that succeeded its demise—whether Dubuffet's in Paris or that of the Abstract Expressionists in New York—this tradition could still play a fugitive role, to be sure, serving as foil or irritant, as something to be resisted, ransacked, or transcended; but it could no longer offer direct sustenance. Which, incidentally is one reason why Balthus has come to loom so large in our thinking about the School of Paris and the pictorial tradition it embraced and embodied. For in the work of no other painter of his generation has the will to resist the death of this tradition so completely shaped the scale of the artist's ambition and determined the quality of his oeuvre. Yet, however we may judge Balthus's achievement, it is hard to think of it as anything but a grand—or, depending on one's view of its success, only grandiose—epilogue to the great tradition it celebrates.

Difficult as it may be for us to think about the School of Paris in such terms—not, that is, as an avant-garde renaissance heralding the birth of a new era (which is pretty much the way we have all been brought up to see it), but as the glorious twilight on an epoch drawing to a close—this, I believe, is the way it is going to look to future generations. And this, in turn, is going to entail some drastic revisions in the way the history of modern painting will be written by, and for, those future generations. Already the existing textbook histories of the subject have begun to look obsolete, for they are based not on our current experience of the art in question but on an attempt to elucidate its intentions. Praiseworthy and even necessary as this task of elucidating intentions undoubtedly is, the result—more often than not—is the kind of partisan history that tells us a good deal more about what artists hoped to achieve (and therefore, all too often, are assumed to have achieved) than about what they actually did achieve. And being at the same time wholly governed by a suspension of disbelief in the efficacy of the various avant-garde ideologies that are thought to have determined the artists'

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goals, this history looks more and more like a species of intellectual fiction designed to guarantee a denouement that is at once foregone and unexamined. The least that can be said about such history is that it no longer accords with our experience of the art it is intended to explain. The worst that can be said of it is that it obscures the kinds of distinctions that loom largest in our experience of art and make it so precious to us.

It will be self-evident to anyone who has pondered these matters that certain artists have greatly benefitted from this state of affairs while certain others have suffered. It is ideally suited to the interests, for example, of a figure like Marcel Duchamp, whose actual accomplishment is so slender as to border at times on the non-existent, but it could not be anything but severely damaging to an artist like Bonnard, whose work cannot be made to accommodate the requisite categories and classifications without injury to the very quality of its existence. The priority given to ideas in Duchamp guarantees him a high position in any scenario that favors ideas at the expense of artistic realization. By contrast, Bonnard is an artist who seems to have had no "ideas" at all—except, of course, those that could be articulated by his paintbrush. Yet can anyone really doubt that Bonnard is the superior artist?

Alas, such doubt—never argued, to be sure, but simply assumed—has been a commonplace in the cultural life of the last quarter-century. And in the judgment implicit in this adverse comparison we can still hear the echoes, perhaps, of that curious attack on Bonnard which appeared in the pages of no less a journal than *Cahiers d'Art* in 1947, the year of the artist's death at the age of seventy-nine. That article was very likely inspired by Picasso, for whom *Cahiers d'Art* served as a kind of house organ and whose own ferociously critical view of Bonnard was subsequently reported in detail by Françoise Gilot in her memoir, *Life with Picasso.* The title of the article asked the question: "Pierre Bonnard—est-il un grand peintre?" And the conclusion of the article gave the following answer: "It is evident that this reverence [for Bonnard] is shared only by people who know nothing about the grave difficulties of art and cling above all to what is facile and agreeable."[2] Some version of this judgment will always, I suppose, be the view of professional avant-gardists in every generation, and it is for this reason that Bonnard has survived as a kind of displaced person in the art of his time.

Not the least of the many amazing things about the current exhibition at Beaubourg is the way it instantly sweeps aside all these questions and equivocations—including those that one has carried in one's own head for years—to reveal an artist of overwhelming power and intensity. An artist, moreover, of great originality who, though something of a slow starter, showed a remarkable tenacity and independence in perfecting his own highly individual vision over the course of a long career.

It was a wise decision, I think, to accord Bonnard's work of the Nineties little more than a token representation in this exhibition in order to concentrate on the paintings of his maturity. (Of the sixty-three paintings in the exhibition, fifty are drawn from the years 1920-1947.) For the Bonnard we associate with *la belle époque,* while an artist of enormous charm, intelligence, and vivacity, was above all a public artist, obliged to compete in the marketplace for a living. This he managed to do with distinction, producing a dazzling array of posters, illustrations, stage décors, and the like—many of which are familiar to us as classic examples of Art Nouveau design. But we do not encounter the real power of the artist until we meet with what, by contrast, had better be called the "private" Bonnard—a painter of Baudelaire-ian sensuality who fashioned out of the most "unpromising" materials, namely the abandoned remnants of late Impressionist and Post-Impressionist picture-making which the Cubists had nominated for ob-

2 This episode was discussed by James Thrall Soby in his introduction to *Bonnard and His Environment* (Museum of Modern Art, 1964).

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livion, a style of uncompromising rigor.

The earliest of the paintings in which this private Bonnard reveals himself is the sleeping nude called *La Sieste* (1900). This is a painting with an illustrious history, having first been collected by Leo and Gertrude Stein and subsequently by Kenneth Clark. (It now reposes in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia.) With its forthright depiction of a sleeping female nude on a rumbled bed, it strikes us straightaway as an archetypal image of *fin de siècle* eroticism, and we can hardly doubt that it commemorates a personal experience. Yet, as with so much that we encounter in the private Bonnard, what appears to be the most candid avowal of personal experience is subsumed in an artistic strategy of considerable complexity, and one that tends, if not quite to deny this element of the personal, at least to relegate it to a secondary order of importance. Though not as audacious in either its structure or its angle of vision as Bonnard's pictures would shortly become, *La Sieste* nonetheless gives us a first glimpse of that luminous, soft-edge geometry—scaffoldings of vertical and horizontal bands and blocks of color as deftly deployed in relation to the shape of the support as anything in a Mondrian or a Noland—which evolved into one of the hallmarks of his style. The formal effect of this luminous scaffolding is to radically delimit the space which the painting comprehends in such a way that the eye is made to feel itself in an immediate and irresistible retinal contact with every visible atom of the picture surface. Later, especially in the great paintings of the Thirties, when Bonnard gave greater priority to close-valued color of the most extraordinary intensities and could therefore abandon the kind of chiaroscuro he still relied upon in *La Sieste,* he made this pictorial idea the principal basis of his art. And on that basis he became a colorist whose only rival among his contemporaries was Matisse (if, in the Thirties, even Matisse could really be said to be his rival).

In *La Sieste* we are given only a first glimpse of this development. It remains in some respects a nineteenth-century painting, closer to Degas than to Matisse, and not only in its subject-matter but in the way it is conceived. For like Degas, Bonnard was an artist who painted with the art of the museums in his head. Thus, while the nude figure in *La Sieste* may very well have its origin in the painter's personal experience, we now know that that was by no means its only source, and was probably not even its primary one. For as Sasha Newman points out in a note for the catalogue of the exhibition, the image of the sleeping figure is based, right down to the way the left foot rests on the calf of the right leg, on a Roman copy of a Greek sculpture in the Louvre. What looks so intensely personal in Bonnard is rarely quite as personal, in the anecdotal sense, as it seems. Even in the most erotic paintings, the sexual emotion remains a coefficient of the pictorial idea.

The private Bonnard is, in fact, a far more mysterious and elusive figure than he is generally thought to be. In many of his greatest pictures—paintings of the breakfast or luncheon table, the bedroom, and the bath—the *mise en scène* is drawn from the most intimate moments of the artist's domestic life, which was itself a conundrum to Bonnard's friends. In the Nineties the artist entered into a liaison with a very young woman ("then still a child," his friend Thadée Natanson said) who went by the name of Marthe de Méligny. Some thirty years later—in 1925—she and Bonnard were married, and it was only then that Bonnard discovered her real name, which was Maria Boursin. Even at that late date he seems to have known little or nothing about her, yet she remained something of an obsession in his life and one of the central motifs of his art until her death in 1942.

Because of the ubiquitous figure of the legendary Marthe—bathing, breakfasting, etc.—in Bonnard's major paintings, they often give us the impression of being as diaristic as Picasso's. Yet are they? There is undoubtedly an important connection between the intimacy of Bonnard's subjects and the style of his art—for even his landscapes par-

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take of this intimacy—but his paintings are, all the same, as removed from the diaristic as paintings drawn from life motifs can be. For one thing, the figure of Marthe never ages. She remains a timeless apparition of youthful sensuality—an idea or an archetype even more than a presence. In Bonnard's paintings of her—or, for that matter, of himself—there is no trace of posturing or boasting. There are no displays of virility or emotional violence. What we are made to feel most intensely is the artist's total absorption in what he sees and what he makes of what he sees, and this turns out to be something *we* had never before seen in a painting.

In these paintings drawn from the scenes of his intimate domestic life, I think we are given an important clue to Bonnard's overriding aesthetic interests, and the reason why they remained so tenaciously tethered to the remnants of late Impressionist and Post-Impressionist picture-making. For what matters most to Bonnard—in life, we are tempted to say, as much as in his art—is the accretion and analysis of sensation. Bonnard was never a realist in the sense that Courbet or even Degas, in certain phases of his work, could be said to be, but in some fundamental aspect of his painting he was certainly a subtle and fanatical, if also a highly idiosyncratic, naturalist. He was a naturalist in the sense that Monet was a naturalist—a naturalist of the eye, concentrating more and more intently as he developed his art on the precision of his perceptions and on the vexing problem of creating an exact pictorial correlative for their faithful representation.

It is no idle paradox to suggest that naturalism of this sort—a naturalism so intensely absorbed in analyzing and refining the most minute particles of perception—must inevitably find its pictorial resolution in a kind of abstraction. That is the course traced in the late paintings of Monet, and we find something akin to this tendency in Bonnard as well. Perceptual naturalism carried to this radical extreme tends, by its very nature, to be boundless and anarchic, and must therefore invoke some countervailing principle if it is not to dissipate the sensations it has garnered in a formless miasma of atomized observation.

Bonnard had such a principle ready to hand, as it were, in the pictorial conventions of the Nabi style on which he was nurtured as a young artist. Derived from Gauguin and the Pont Aven school, these conventions placed great emphasis on "flat," unbroken planes of highly saturated color, and constituted one of the definitive modalities of Post-Impressionist painting. In opposition to the naturalistic component of Impressionism, the Nabi style offered itself as a more "abstract" or Symbolist alternative, and Bonnard retained a strong attachment to its formalist outlook throughout his career. Yet at the same time, like his friend Vuillard, who probably influenced Bonnard a good deal in this regard, particularly in the creation of his mature style, he found the austerity and abstraction of the Nabi style insufficient for his increasingly complex purposes—insufficient, we may say, for his increasingly complex sensibility. There was no place in it for registering those accretions of sensation that became more and more essential to his temperament as an artist—and, we may infer, as a man.

To accommodate that compelling appetite for sensation, Bonnard was obliged to turn back to certain elements in the Impressionism which the Nabi painters had categorically disavowed—and which, in fact, continued to be disavowed by virtually every generation of avant-garde painters until the time came when the Abstract Expressionists rehabilitated Monet. The Impressionist element remained but one term in the dialectic of Bonnard's style, but it was a crucially important term—for it was the means by which the private Bonnard continued to supply his painting with extraordinary reserves of lyric emotion. It was also crucially important in inspiring the kind of disapproval that Bonnard sometimes met with. The truth is, Bonnard's decision to "return" to Impressionism was an act of great artistic daring in the art life of his time. It was one of those radical aesthetic initiatives—radical,

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at least, in refusing to conform to the reigning avant-garde imperatives of the moment —that are taken to be conservative and even reactionary only because they are mistaken as efforts to return to something safe and settled. Bonnard—who was almost alone among twentieth-century masters in this respect—understood that in the abandoned remnants of the old Impressionism there remained some unfinished artistic business of great creative value, and he pursued his intuition—no doubt because it offered him a vein that exactly suited his private world of feeling—with an uncommon tenacity. When Picasso dismissed Bonnard by saying "That's not painting, what he does," he was only, after all, saying that Bonnard had never succumbed to the influence of Cubism, and it was probably inevitable that we would have to wait until Cubism and its many offshoots and by-products had quit the cultural stage before Bonnard would come to be recognized as the master he is. That moment seems at last to have arrived.

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Balthus in New York

by Jed Perl

When artists talk about Balthus, whose paintings are now the subject of a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,[1] they frequently seem to enter into a kind of imaginary dialogue with him. Comments that I have heard more than once over the years are: "I can't figure out why he decided to do that in that part of the painting," or, "I see why he decided on that effect—I know why he thought it would work . . . but it seems, somehow, unconvincing." Artists—and I don't think it's just representational artists—often approach the work of Balthus the way they would that of a close friend. They feel in some way a part of it—implicated. Balthus's fame will probably always begin and end with his young girls, but what many of us are responding to in his work now is not so much the particularity of his subject matter (though many lessons can be learned from *that*) as the range of his pictorial imagination—the fecundity of painting ideas. At this point, the success or failure of any particular Balthus is probably less important than the way Balthus can let loose with ideas and go wherever they may lead him.

A week or so before the Balthus retrospective opened, a show of new paintings by Jasper Johns closed at the Leo Castelli Gallery on Greene Street. Johns's first notoriety, like Balthus's, was based on a somewhat sensational subject matter. As the years have gone by and Balthus and Johns have grown in fame, they've both kept about themselves a certain air of mystery, showing rarely and giving to the surfaces of the works they do show an elegance born of unusual materials: casein, encaustic, marble dust. They both have come to seem—and have, I think, wanted to seem—a bit out of this world, in touch with some lofty, ineffable realm of the imagination. There is, though, a world of difference between what Johns offered at Leo Castelli, which was sham imagination, and what Balthus offers, which is the real thing. Johns's elegant surfaces and art references, his vaunted range (the Castelli show included both representational and abstract pictures), his shades of sex and death: these are art ideas over which Johns casts a sort of protective hush as he assembles them into make-believe, toy masterpieces. Though Balthus has for years exhibited a similar taste for elegant surfaces and self-conscious invocations of past art, with Balthus painting is a criticism of sensibility, and the painting process is allowed to—even expected to—demolish the starting assumptions. Balthus gives himself up to the picture. He has rarely let his ambitions betray his gifts, and he has never been afraid to let his ambitions reveal his limitations.

1 "Balthus" is on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York from February 29 through May 13. It was shown, in a slightly different form, at the Centre National d'Art et Culture Georges Pompidou in Paris from November 4, 1983, through January 23, 1984.

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While it is not too hard to see where Balthus has failed, his very best pictures exist in that rare category of works that have not yet found their fate.

The Balthus retrospective has come to New York at a time when representation, imagery, figuration, subject matter (there are many terms) is a central concern for two different sorts of artists. One group has been around for a long time. This first group—which numbers among its older members many students and friends of the Abstract Expressionists—has, at its best, been drawn not so much to the purely mimetic aspects of representational art as to the richness of pictorial possibilities inherent in the representational modes. The second group of artists—a few years ago they were called New Image artists, now they are often called Neo-Expressionists—has come to representation quite recently, and its work has roots less in traditional modernist painting than in the conceptual and anti-art movements of the 1960s and 1970s. For the first group of artists representation offers access to a complex and endlessly flexible syntax; for the second group the power of representation lies within itself, in its Duchampian force as statement—a kind of post-abstract shock value. For this second group the *Mona Lisa* is not a pictorial vision with a poetic efflorescence but an image with a fixed meaning ripe for unfixing. (A few years ago, when a Leonardo *Madonna and Child* from the Hermitage was shown in New York, René Ricard, a poet who has written about Neo-Expressionism, wrote a short article for *Art in America* in which he discussed the painting mostly in terms of the damaged condition of its surface.)

Thinking about the relationship of these two groups and of how they may be reacting to Balthus has reminded me of a collision between the old and the new kinds of representation that took place, in painted form, a few years ago. David Salle's show at the Mary Boone Gallery in April of 1981 was pure new-style representation. The bipartite canvases contained send-ups of all sorts of art, both abstract and representational, and none was stranger than *The Old, the New and the Different* (1981), in which the larger of the two panels consisted of an oversized copy of André Derain's 1945 *Pilgrimage to Cythera.*

Derain, who died in 1954, was a pioneering Fauvist and primitivist who, after a kind of crisis in the years around World War I, began to try to reconnect what he felt to be the lost wholeness of classical pictorial structure with his sense of nature as complete unto itself. In the 1920s Derain was often said to represent, in a triumvirate with Picasso and Matisse, the highest achievement of Parisian painting; after World War II, when Derain's reputation was largely in eclipse, he became, for both Balthus and Giacometti, a friend and an inspiration. For Balthus and Giacometti—and for many American painters who came to representation in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the painter Leland Bell, who had known Balthus and Giacometti in Paris—Derain's work demonstrated the relevance of the past as a living canon of value and form.

In *The Old, the New and the Different* Salle uses one of Derain's late, small (a bit over a foot high) paintings as an element in a much larger (six-and-a-half-foot high), collage-like whole. Salle's is an act, in the current parlance, of appropriation. The Derain, of figures sporting in a dark landscape, is an open-ended experiment in the re-invention of tradition. The composition of Watteau's *Pilgrimage to Cythera* is invoked through flashing brushstrokes reminiscent of Pompeiian painting and Magnasco. In Salle's hand it becomes something else: closed-in, a joke, a piece of period style. Salle's act of appropriation removes from the Derain its prickly, difficult relation to tradition and modernity. In Salle's version, Derain's achievement, which may skirt kitsch precisely because it attempts to engage fully with sensibilities that are beyond our easy emotional reach, becomes kitsch. The art is no longer difficult, the viewer no longer need decide.

Balthus has now achieved a fame that has, at least in recent years, eluded the later work

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of his mentor and friend Derain. And yet, Balthus's art remains difficult in many of the same ways as Derain's. Their uses of older art, their relations to modernity are not all that different. What may, indeed, make Balthus a bit hard for many of the visitors to the Metropolitan retrospective is precisely what has drawn painters to him since the 1950s: his seriousness. We are used, now, to sex and violence in art, but we are not used to an artist who takes his kinky sex seriously, who will not disarm it with a laugh. We are used to flattened-out figures, but we are not used to an artist for whom flatness is *not* a given but a goal. For Balthus, in his great paintings of the 1970s, planarity is a dream, a phantom, to be pursued, invented, achieved, perhaps lost again.

For the first stop of the Balthus show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the French produced an enormous catalogue. Along with the usual color reproductions, it contains reprints of almost every major text on the artist; some long, well-illustratd essays; a reprint of Balthus's only illustrated book, *Mitsou,* published with an introduction by Rilke when the artist was thirteen years old; a most valuable catalogue of black-and-white reproductions of every known painting by Balthus, including lost works; and an excellent bibliography, along with some interesting odds and ends, such as Balthus's single published text (on the death of Giacometti) and some little-known book illustrations. This catalogue is replaced at the Metropolitan by another, and it is thin gruel: a brief essay, combining life and appreciation, and brief comments on each painting.[2] Much fuss has been made in the press over the fact that the Pompidou catalogue contains (at the artist's request) no biographical information, and it is good that the Metropolitan, refusing to give in to this silliness, has included a full biography. A comparison between the French and American catalogues, however, cannot but reflect badly on the Metropolitan. The Metropolitan has the dates; the Pompidou catalogue points to what is far more important: the artistic and intellectual matrix out of which these paintings have been born. American art criticism often gives the impression that art's capacity to express ideas is in a direct ratio to its distance from traditional forms: paintings are just paintings, while earth works, environments, assemblages can convey just about anything. Through the Pompidou catalogue one begins to understand to what degree the interiors and cityscapes of Balthus stand at an intellectual crossroads—somewhere between Surrealism and Existentialism—and present an artist's-eye view onto some of the big ideas of the day.

The Paris catalogue brings to life the almost endless series of barriers—aesthetic, iconographic, literary—that Balthus has set between his art and reality, between himself and the world *out there.* Balthus, like any modernist, knows that the final collapse of normative perception in Cubism has rendered the unmediated, direct experience of nature all but impossible. In Balthus's paintings the iconography and literature of eroticism, the visions of Baudelaire, Proust, and Rilke, the structures of older art, become conceptual frameworks through which nature can be experienced and made into art. Balthus's is the attitude of the aesthete: it is his feeling for art that enables him to turn the experience of life into art.

Piero della Francesca and Gustave Courbet, the painters of the past to whom Balthus has looked most frequently, both worked during periods when artists were examining nature anew, yet their appeal for Balthus surely lies in the distance that they maintained from reality, in the way they brought to the surface the strange, submerged poetry that underlay appearances. For Balthus, Piero is the odd man out of Quattrocento naturalism: the one indifferent to anatomy, indifferent to the naturalistic gesture language of Masaccio, the one who submerges action within design and space within a geometry less physical than mathematical. For Balthus, as for Seurat, Piero is a modern

2 *Balthus* was published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art; 176 pages, $29.50, $16.95 (paper).

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hero who makes of Christian piety a post-naturalistic aestheticism. Balthus's Courbet, equally out of his time, is not the Courbet who mounted the barrricades of naturalism, but the Courbet who leads ineluctably into Surrealism and Cézanne. In Balthus, we think of a Courbet who takes us through bedroom doors, into a world of sex and dreams, and of the Courbet who shows us the children of the socialist Proudhon, sunk into the unique time and space of children's play. We also think, in some of Balthus's landscapes and later figure paintings, of the Courbet of Cézanne and Braque: the Courbet of the palette knife, who ceases to represent things and starts to transform them into pure slaps of paint.

There are no deep vistas in Balthus. Just as his Piero and Courbet construct traps for nature, so Balthus himself folds everything back into art. Balthus's street scenes are closed-off, with no sky—exterior rooms. His interiors are Victorian, Biedermeier, Roman, Japanese: of another time and place. His Alps are the Alps of old-fashioned walking tours. Even his most immediate landscapes, the ones done at his Château in central France in the 1950s, show nature filtered, in this case through Cézanne, Bonnard, and Braque. A good deal of Balthus's career might be described by some words of his mother's close friend and his first mentor, Rilke, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*: "To sit and watch a warm streak of afternoon sun and know many things about girls of bygone days and be a poet." Balthus's view of the interior and the street cannot but recall the Surrealists, and Baudelaire. It is no accident that some of Walter Benjamin's notes for "Paris, Capitol of the 19th Century" prove elegant descriptions of Balthusian themes; Balthus has, quite consciously, set out to view life as literature. "For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theater . . . . The crowd is a veil through which the familiar city lures the flaneur like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room."

Balthus, from the very beginning of his career, keeps us at a distance. His first show, at the Galérie Pierre in Paris in 1934, was immediately described by his friend Artaud as casting the experience of the modern world in the classical language of David. In his 1935 self-portrait, *The King of Cats,* the elegant legs extend to infinity as in an illustration by Gavarni or Lami, and a portfolio is inscribed with the picture's title rather in the style of a nineteenth-century print. In the 1934 portrait of the wife of the owner of the Galérie Pierre, the oversized head, like a head in a primitive painting, balances on the slim body in a manner reminiscent of the human flowers in Grandville's illustrations. All this suggests an escapade in nineteenth-century imagery (those charmed and trashy regions Joseph Cornell loved to mine), just barely vindicated by the here-and-nowness of the subjects. These two portraits, some others in the same vein, the portrait of the Vicomtesse de Noailles (which I have never seen: it is in the catalogue of the New York show but not in the exhibit), and the portraits of Miró and Derain (owned by the Museum of Modern Art for years and probably the Balthuses most familiar in New York) constitute an extraordinary achievement for an artist still in his mid-twenties. The bare interiors, in which the few pieces of furniture stand out like Chirico-esque volumes in space, seem to construct reality from the ground up. There is no excess, and the plain, brown dryness of it all resonates a pleasing lucidity.

The portraits of young girls of the 1930s complicate further this dense distancing net of nineteenth-century allusions with the introduction of self-involved, actress-like figures sunk in an erotic, often masturbatory dream. They are, in part, invitations to voyeurism, but—remembering that these girls never look at us—they are also terribly remote. Their distance is, I suppose, an aspect of their sexiness: they are unapproachable, thus desirable.

Looking at these paintings close up one sees an artist who wants terribly to *make it real.* Few modern painters have tried to give

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so fully modeled a quality to their forms, and the few who have tend to revert, as Balthus never does, to academic formulas. Balthus's effort is superb, yet the forms never have the completeness, the ultimate simplicity that we feel—and that we know Balthus feels—in Corot and Courbet. The planes in a face like that of *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938) get too broken and complicated and don't, finally, cohere. The pictures don't seem to breathe as wholes, only as pieces. In retrospect the elements in these interiors—the cats, chairs, clothes—may seem too remote: one remembers them individually, not as ensembles. The paintings are shadowboxes with stage lights.

Of the entire gallery of young girls of the 1930s and 1940s the only one that at this point seems to me completely successful is *The Game of Patience* (1943). The figure is an audacious construction, a kind of boomerang form that springs upward from the floor, off its one, small foot and plunges, head first, into the space above the table. On first examination, what seems to hold this powerful form in place is mainly the insistent, downward thrust of the striped wallpaper, and that's part of it—a small part of it. Actually, the clue to this picture is the back right leg of the card table, which isn't there. Or rather, it's there, but hidden from view. Balthus has arranged things so that this leg is completely covered by a chair leg and the girl's leg; even the shadow that the table leg would cast is completely absorbed in the shadow cast by the back leg of the chair. Thus, the table is three-legged—almost two-legged, since the other back leg as well is barely visible.

Read in traditional terms this is bad painting; in post-Cubist terms, though, it's interesting painting. By refusing to let the table complete itself in fictive, three-dimensional terms, Balthus forces the table to complete itself in two-dimensional terms—as an element in a surface design. This is the essential image-idea in *The Game of Patience.* Every form implies a three-dimensional space but must be completed in two-dimensional space: Courbet redone after Juan Gris. In the context of a composition that appears, the more one looks at it, like a maze of parallelograms, the girl's head, which seemed to me at first rather banal, now has a special poetic magic: she is the intelligence at the center of the maze.

This reading of *The Game of Patience* was arrived at over a number of visits to the Metropolitan retrospective. I have now seen the show three times. I saw many of the same paintings in Venice in 1980, and have seen others at other times and in other places. My views keep changing, and I find that my estimates are, most often, rising. I don't think I'm the only person who has had this reaction. Balthus is an artist of large ambitions, and, in the way of all true originals, he demands that we think and experience in ways we have never exactly thought and experienced before. His failures are all interesting ones. In taking the measure of his successes we may feel ourselves stretched as we almost never are.

The largeness of Balthus's ambition would seem to have something to do with a desire to tell stories—and, like all moderns with a story to tell, Balthus has had to find his own way through the crisis in storytelling that is central to modernist art. From an early age Balthus must have known that no modern can tell a story straight. Rilke, a guiding spirit of the artist's youth, had, in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* completed in 1910, written one of the unclassifiable classics of the century, a non-novel novel. In Balthus's first major figure composition, the superbly crafted *Street* (1933)—a picture suffused with the tawny tones of good Biedermeier furniture—the story, borrowed from Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte,* is also a non-story. There is no central event, no center, just a batch of elements, street life atomized into little piquant incidents: funny boy, plank-man, horseplay.

The Street is a light, brilliant painting. It may, finally, have too much the air of strategies about it, but the vigor of the figures as they catapult themselves through the space

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of the street makes it the most of-this-time-and-place of Balthus's large figure compositions. *The Mountain* (1937) and *The Passage du Commerce Saint-André* (1952-4) are also non-stories, but in these paintings the figures seem a bit drugged, immobilized, and the incidents are not nearly so witty. These large pictures (each over ten feet wide) are a mass of innuendos: storytelling by addition or collage. *The Mountain* presents an Alpine outing that has disintegrated in a way perhaps not unrelated to the unraveling of events in movies like *The Rules of the Game* and *La Dolce Vita*. Dreams and desire hover in the pure mountain air. Figures stretch, sleep, smoke, and explore admidst a landscape full of sexual innuendos. Projected on so vast, so heroic a scale, the pocked terrain and walking sticks plunged into earth have a startling resonance. The question remains, though, whether ambiguity can provide enough of a subject to fill such a great big painting. Can undertones fill the space? On the evidence of *The Mountain,* I don't think so. It's a painting without a center.

When I first saw *The Passage du Commerce Saint-André* in Venice in 1980, I felt that it, too, failed to project a subject that could fill its vast dimensions. In the interim, I read Guy Davenport's discussion of the painting, and he helped unlock the picture for me. (His article on Balthus, published in *Antaeus* 39, Autumn, 1980, is listed in neither the Metropolitan nor Pompidou bibliography. The format here, of short blocks of prose, follows the original.) Davenport begins by relating how he first saw the painting "at the Centre Pompidou in an afternoon of surprises. I had just seen my first Tatlin and some late Malevitches unknown until then."

> For the first time I remembered how familiar the street was to me, a locale I crossed time and again when I first knew Paris just after the war. The painting did not exist then, though Balthus must have been making studies for it, a picture to epitomize all his work.
>
> Inside the painting's fetching mysteriousness there had been all along a familiarity that I had not isolated until I stood before the canvas itself. A more wonderful way of seeing Proust's theory of the redemption of time in triumphant proof I cannot imagine.
>
> Another surprise was to notice that for all the resonances in this most Balthusian of all Balthus' work (the Rilkean question, as of the *Saltimbanques,* "Who are these people?", its kinship to Beckett and Sartre) it belongs with a rightness to the Paris of Simenon.
>
> There's the same flatness and ordinariness, as if to say: Look, the world is not really a mystery at all. It appears to be, but look again. These eight people, a dog, and a doll are the very essence of a Left Bank backstreet. The fine strangeness of it all is in our minds.
>
> The old woman with her cane, a concierge nipping out briefly to do her shopping, can tell you all about these people. She is the kind of spiteful old soul who gives Maigret and Janvier their best information. Seeing the painting is very like Maigret learning a neighborhood.
>
> The figure we see from the back (a self-portrait, Jean Leymarie says in his introduction to the Skira *Balthus*), who is coming from the baker's, is a standard type in the *quartier.* Maigret would suspect him of all manner of irresponsibility, Bohemian attitudes, and cosmopolitan vice.

When I first looked at *The Passage* with Davenport's article in mind, I felt he was reading too much into the painting. I was still bothered by the strangely generalized, rather anonymous character of the figures: they are seen as if in a haze, their faces not fully realized. Returning to the painting again, I slowly began to get it. The figures are not supposed to give up their private mysteries. They remain distant, circumspect, and the vagueness of it all becomes the measure of our distance from them. This is, in some sense, a rather un-French painting; it lacks *clarité.* The Paris is the Paris of Rilke's *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*: a Northern Paris, ghost-haunted, as if in a movie by

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Ingmar Bergman. The clear, four-square space of the canvas does not prepare us for a mystery, but the paintiness of the surface functions as the barrage of words does for the modernist writer. The medium is the artist's consciousness, and we see through it. *The Passage* may be one of the most remarkable large paintings of the century. It is a painting that I, at least, am just beginning to know.

We might imagine, if not for Balthus's series of illustrations for *Wuthering Heights* (1934-5), that the muffled, circumspect drama of *The Mountain* and *The Passage* was the only kind of story Balthus could tell. The *Wuthering Heights* illustrations, though, prove Balthus the clearest, most compelling storyteller of his time. Balthus's *Wuthering Heights* drawings, like the work of Maurice Sendak and Edward Gorey, are nourished on a passion for the book illustration traditions of the nineteenth century; the difference is that Balthus's far deeper artistry permits him to let go, to improvise within these traditions in ways not given to Sendak or Gorey. Balthus makes of nineteenth-century chiaroscuro and distorted figure proportions an explosive, modern poetry. His pen-and-ink drawings, with their massed, scribbled lines, take possession of the nineteenth-century conventions so totally as to dispell any whiff of nostalgia.

On the evidence of the *Wuthering Heights* drawings it is surprising that Balthus has so consistently avoided book illustration. (The only other illustrations I know of are two done for a friend, the poet Pierre-Jean Jouve, of which one is in the *Wuthering Heights* style, and the other is in a lithographic style reminiscent of Delacroix and Géricault.) No doubt Balthus's reluctance to pursue book illustration in later years has something to do with his inability to find a publisher for the *Wuthering Heights* project (the plates were ultimately printed, as an album, in *Minotaure* in 1935). When one remembers, though, that two artists Balthus knew and revered, Bonnard and Derain, were deeply involved in book illustration, it is hard not to feel something more than the force of circumstance at work here. I would hazard the guess that Balthus's rejection of illustration has something to do with his sense of how problematic illustration is for the modernist artist. (At the time he was doing the *Wuthering Heights* illustrations he was not painting.) One can imagine that Balthus has looked with envy at the situation of artists like Carpaccio or Piero, for whom the pictorial impulse was always, in some central way, a narrative impulse not far divorced from a basic illustrative impulse. The situation in which Balthus finds himself is a completely changed one. Balthus knows that, with the ascendancy of decorative over narrative coherence in Western painting, illustration becomes, almost by definition, a violation of high art. The move toward an increasingly decorative organization in Balthus's work of the 1940s, and the centrality of decoration in much of the work of the last thirty years makes this all quite clear. If some of Balthus's greatness owes to his refusal to completely abandon the illustrative impulse, he also harbors no illusions about the terrible beating that illustration has suffered at the hands of modernism.

All this is perhaps by way of saying that to be a representational artist is not necessarily to be a traditional artist—an elision too often made about Balthus, which has very little to do with his art. As the representational painting shown in New York in the last fifteen years has made abundantly clear, the appeal of classical and historical subject matter remains strong. Though many artists seem to feel that painting Arcadia or Apollo or the Prodigal Son is a way to affirm a connection with the past, their paintings have exposed, much more often than not, the inability of the old subjects, when treated in the old ways, to really engage us. Balthus has been called a poseur for taking on the trappings of an ancestral nobility that have nothing to do with his half-Jewish, Bohemian background. There is doubtless some justice in this accusation; but I think it ought to be pointed out that there is another sort of poseur: the artist who ornaments his pictures with a classical past to which he has

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no real connection. In subject matter, Balthus has taken the hard, high road. His art has its distinctive myths, legends, and landscapes, and they are ones that have not been obtained secondhand.

Balthus's most private myth, finally—a story that he has come to tell with more and more circumspection, so that it has become, in recent years, hardly a story at all—has to do with adolescent girls and sex. It has made him, surely somewhat by design, notorious. Balthus's adolescents have nothing in common with the Lolita of Nabokov's novel to which they are so often compared. They are not placed at the center of a vision—in the case of Nabokov's *Lolita,* a comic vision—that includes a criticism of the desires they arouse. Lolita has free will: she can make a fool of her pursuer and she destroys him in the end. Time, in any event, is on her side: she will grow up. Balthus's girls cannot grow out of the paintings: they are locked in their salacious poses, exposing underwear and crotch, as they are locked in their moody, claustrophobic, stage-set-like Victorian interiors. There is humor in Balthus, and even in some of the paintings of adolescents, but, unlike Nabokov's humor, it doesn't clear the air, it thickens it.

While the comic, drive-in America against which Nabokov sets his Lolita saga is the farthest thing imaginable from a Balthusian world, the setting of Nabokov's later novel, *Ada,* comes pretty close to the Balthus spirit. *Ada* is a modernist send-up of the family-chronicle novel, and the elaborate, filigreed prose of its early sections, describing the beginnings of the love affair between the young boy Van and the young girl Ada, may almost out-Balthus Balthus.

> On those relentlessly hot July afternoons, Ada liked to sit on a cool piano stool of ivoried wood at a white-oilcloth'd table in the sunny music room, her favorite botanical atlas open before her, and copy out in color on creamy paper some singular flower . . . . The long beam slanting in from the french window flowed in the faceted tumbler, in the tinted water, and on the tin of the paint box—and while she delicately painted an eyespot or the lobes of a lip, rapturous concentration caused the tip of her tongue to curl at the corner of her mouth, and as the sun looked on, the fantastic black-blue-brown-haired child seemed in her turn to mimic the mirror-of-Venus blossom. Her flimsy, loose frock happened to be so deeply cut out behind that whenever she concaved her back while moving her prominent scapulae to and fro and tilting her head—as with air-poised brush she surveyed her damp achievement, or with the outside of her left wrist wiped a strand of hair off her temple—Van, who had drawn up to her seat as close as he dared, could see down her sleek *ensellure* as far as her coccyx and inhale the warmth of her entire body. His heart thumping, one miserable hand deep in his trouser pocket—where he kept a purse with half a dozen ten-dollar gold pieces to disguise his state—he bent over her, as she bent over her work.

Guy Davenport—who is so good on *The Passage* and whose own short stories are, like Nabokov's writing, full of fine images of adolescent eroticism—makes an interesting case for Balthusian adolescence: the kids, he argues, are part of a coherent, fully dimensional vision of childhood. In Davenport's telling, it seems rather like the world of Nabokov's *Ada* and Davenport's own stories. His fictions, collected in *Tatlin!, Da Vinci's Bicycle,* and *Eclogues,* show adolescent sexuality as essentially homoerotic. The distant settings (a sea-swept Holland, backroads of France, Greece) combine with a voracious appetite for the best and most elegant in art and philosophy (De Stijl, Joseph Wright of Derby, Van Gogh, Wittgenstein, Telemann) and descriptions of bikes, blue jeans, and the scanty cuts of European men's underwear to create a bright, very contemporary yet somehow completely lost world of youth.

For Davenport, Balthus is an artist who represents just this kind of adolescent paradise.

> Modern French writing has been interested in childhood in a way that American and English

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writing has not. The French see not an innocent but an experienced mind in the child. Montherlant treats children as an endangered species needing protection from parents.

Gide's understanding runs parallel, except that he makes allowances for transformation to maturity. The child in Alain Fournier, Proust, Colette, Cocteau inhabits a realm imaginatively animated with a genius very like that of the artist. Children live in their minds.

Baudelaire saw genius as childhood sustained and perfected. There is a sense among the French that adulthood is a falling away from the intelligence of children. We in the United States contrast child and adult as we contrast ignorance and knowledge, innocence and experience.

We do not give our children credit for having arrived at anything. They have no driver's license, no money, no sexual emotions (and are forbidden them), no real sports they can play, no power. Balthus's children are as complacent as cats and as accomplished in stillness.

Balthus's and Davenport's fascination with the ways underpants fit over young bodies; Balthus's and Nabokov's fondness for the picture of a young girl poring over a great book or album: surely there are connections here. But as surely there are distinctions, and these tend to show up the problems with Balthus's eroticism. In Nabokov's *Ada* and Davenport's stories the eroticism is a complicity of equals: Ada's beauty is seen through the eyes of the equally young and inexperienced Van, while in Davenport's stories the contemplation of younger by somewhat older males creates a cozy, mythic convergence of desired and desirer—an exemplary, Greek friendliness. It is interesting, in this context, that in Balthus's one overt sex picture, *The Guitar Lesson* (1934), the female figure holding the young girl over her knees is a disguised self-portrait. Balthus may have felt that a female-female confrontation would more truly convey the self-reflexive quality of adolescent sexuality that he was after.

If the problem with some of Balthus's adolescents is, finally, a problem of the artist's and the viewer's relation to them, it may be something that's built into the very nature of a certain kind of painting. I have felt, in front of some of Caravaggio's male nudes, an unease not unlike that I have felt in front of some of Balthus's female nudes. The blatant presentness of the figures seems to violate our sense of the picture as a fiction. What it all comes down to with some of Balthus's adolescents is that pictorial realism just can't transform erotic content enough. The adolescents of Nabokov and Davenport are convincing in ways that some of Balthus's aren't because we experience their sexiness not as primary visual information but filtered through the secondary world of words.

I have tried to take Balthus's content seriously. While it is foolish to claim, as some have, that Balthus's paintings have no erotic content, the rather violent reaction the adolescents have elicited in parts of the art press, as if Balthus were a high-class vendor of dirty postcards, is another kind of obfuscation. Balthus is, like Nabokov and Davenport, an aesthete, and part of the value of aestheticism as a world view lies in what it permits, in the way it pushes back the limits of morality. That does not mean that we do not bring to the work of art our feelings from the world—we do and we should. That these erotic pictures of young girls are painted by a grown man cannot be overlooked, and to say that they would feel different if done by a woman is not to lay praise or blame, merely to state the obvious. Finally, Balthus's adolescents may be harder to look at now than when they were painted almost a half-century ago. In the 1930s, the idea of adolescence as an erotic state was perhaps unusual enough to compel respect as a uniquely private vision, whereas today, with sexy adolescents everywhere, the same figures may seem both rather banal and overloaded with social implications.

Balthus, while following his own demons, has at times caught a bit of the spirit of the

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day. The pictures of the 1930s and 1940s have a dark, retrospective, often brooding quality. The works of the 1950s and early 1960s, like the works of many European painters of the time, are almost too insistent in their serenity, as if it were necessary to assure oneself that everything was now all right. The period of the late 1950s and early 1960s (often called the Chassy period after the Château de Chassy in the Morvan region of central France where Balthus moved in 1953) would seem to be the phase of Balthus's development with which there is least sympathy today. Perhaps it is a case of our being both too near and too far from the work. Our unease may also have something to do with the particular synthesis that Balthus was attempting in those years.

For Balthus, the 1950s loom, much as they do within the far larger orbit of Picasso, as a period of disengagement and realignment. After the completion of *The Room* and *The Passage* in 1954, Parisian culture ceases to function for Balthus as a fount of inspiration. For Balthus, as for Picasso, the physical removal from Paris is the acceptance of a spiritual removal. In the 1950s the art of Balthus, like the art of older artists such as Picasso and Braque, becomes at times obsessively ornamental. (Only Matisse goes in the other direction.) The pictures sometimes close up completely, approaching a weird form of highly artificial, obsessional, pondered, and ponderous decoration: ugly-beautiful.

I find the work of the late 1950s hard to write about, not only because I am unconvinced by many of the paintings, but also because it is the period of which our understanding remains least complete. It is Balthus's most prolific period by far. According to the list at the back of the Pompidou catalogue, between 1951 and 1960 Balthus finished ninety-four paintings, against forty-five between 1941 and 1950, nine between 1961 and 1970, and thirteen between 1971 and 1980. Many of the paintings of the 1950s are small, but the quality of the achievement of the 1950s is not served by showing us the same dozen "major" works. Maybe now that the Metropolitan has mounted a large-scale survey, some smaller institution will take up the idea of a show devoted to the Balthus of the 1950s and early 1960s: such a show would include his one painting of a boy (*Boy with Pigeons* [1959-60]); his one male nude (*The Bather* [1960]); the pictures of nudes in bathrooms that are the most self-conscious acts of homage to Bonnard; and many still lifes and landscapes.

It is during the Chassy period that Balthus becomes, more openly than ever before, a modernist. During these years the surfaces begin to thicken, if not quite to the impasto of the works of the 1970s, to a rumpled, gravelly density. The color of the earlier works, which always carried in its modeled chiaroscuro a certain tendency toward whiteness or grayness, gives way to a chalky lightness of close-toned, pastel blues, greens, and pinks. While the subjects—still lifes, landscapes, girls dozing on sofas beneath open windows—suggest an informality of handling, the subjects are not in fact experienced firsthand, but with a meditative insistence that transforms them into the most completely *designed* of all Balthus's works.

The danger of the Chassy style would seem to lie in a tendency to overdetermine the picture: my feeling about *The Cup of Coffee* (1959-60), which I saw some years ago, and *The Moth* (1960) is that Balthus has become so absorbed in his new sense of the decorative as an organizing principle that he has failed to leave anything for the viewer to infer. The crisis of the Chassy period lies in Balthus's effort to reconcile the divergent claims of a classical, spatial legibility and a modern surface design while sacrificing nothing on either side of the equation. It is not, finally, surprising that the pictures sometimes seem to describe an impasse—or that, at times, it seems a rather fascinating impasse. In *Landscape with a Tree* (1958-60) the hyped-up, candy color—like a Monet of the 1880s—is matched with a surface geometry that could be a diagram of a Poussin; it creates a striking combination of sweet and sour, tough and pretty elements.

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Though each of Balthus's works ought to be judged on its own terms, it is also enlightening to sometimes think about the later works as a reaction to and comment on the earlier works. For example, the vast dimensions of *The Room* (1952-54) are easier to understand when one realizes that part of the problem with some of the earlier pictures of interiors such as the series of Living Rooms of the early 1940s is precisely in their scale. Despite the outlandish goings-on in *The Living Room* (1941-43), where the table in front of the couch becomes a giant phallus on the verge of penetrating the sleeping girl, the picture seems rather dim and soap opera-ish. Ten years later, in *The Room,* where the ravishing is done by the light coming through the window (a modern-day Danae), the scale takes it all out of the realm of the ordinary. *The Room* is a painting that I can't yet say I love—the flung-back head of the young girl still seems a bit movie-starlet ridiculous—but it's a painting that looks better every time I see it.

How exactly the Chassy period fits into an evolution I am not really prepared to say. The one sure masterpiece of the period, *The Fortune Teller* (1956), is in some sense a reconsideration of themes first worked out ten years earlier in *The Game of Patience.* An intermediate treatment of the theme, also titled *The Game of Patience* (1954-55), had largely done away with the surface architecture: *The Fortune Teller* renders explicit what was implicit in the 1940s—it brings everything to the surface. Still, the intensive attempt to achieve space within planarity that the works of the 1950s suggest must have given too little rein to Balthus's passionate attachment to the older kind of space. In the late 1960s he comes out of it all, in some way purged. To the paintings brought together in the last, remarkable room of the Metropolitan exhibit there is a new sense of openness, a new ease and simplicity. Here we have *The Card Players* (1966-73)—one of Balthus's greatest, a picture that brings the narrative power of Giotto straight into the heart of the twentieth century—and a string of strangely beautiful nudes. The figures, now bigger, mostly in the range of life size, seem freed. Bonnard, Braque, the nineteenth century: now it's all just a memory.

From the fine series of drawings in the show, and even more so from the magnificent album of drawings published in 1983,[3] we can get some sense of how Balthus arrived at his current mode: figure drawing seems in some way a clue to where Balthus is now. Though he's not a great draftsman in the sense of Matisse, his drawings, may, like Bonnard's, be great painter's drawings: thinking drawings. (He is also a superb watercolorist, with some of Delacroix's gift for the medium.) Both in the show and in the book, the majority of drawings are from the last twenty-five years. Apparently, Balthus was in the habit of destroying drawings in earlier years—or at least of letting them deteriorate in the studio through a process of benign neglect. What drawings there are from the 1930s and 1940s tend to be quite sketchy, which would indicate that at that point much of the actual working out of the figures took place during the painting process. The increase in the number and the resolution of the drawings in recent years is certainly connected with a change in the painting. Drawing has now become for Balthus a process of devouring and transmogrifying reality. In the drawings of the 1960s and 1970s the modeling in broad areas reduces everything to a flattened-out chiaroscuro. There is a velvet-softness. Reality is crushed, and the pulling together of space yields a kind of figure that is neither purely planar nor fully in the round. It is a uniquely Balthusian creation, and it forms the centerpiece of some of the best paintings of the last twenty years.

The three great paintings of Setsuko Ideta —a Japanese woman whom Balthus met in Japan in 1962 and married in 1967—are Balthus's most radical contributions to Western tradition. Though Islamic and Jap-

3 *Balthus Drawings and Watercolors,* by Giovanni Carandente; a New York Graphic Society Book published by Little, Brown; $29.95.

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anese influences are common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting, *The Turkish Room* (1963-66) and the two Japanese figures of 1967-76 suggest highly original readings of Japanese and Islamic art. What seems most to have struck Matisse about Islamic art was the capacity that flat areas of color and pattern have, when arranged in powerful configurations, to push out into a vigorous dimensionality. In *The Turkish Room* Balthus picks up on the other side of Persian miniatures: their muffled poetry. Here the magnificent arabesque of the figure opens up a bit—the space breathes—but the overall effect, distinctly un-Matissean, is one of suppression and containment. For Balthus, as for Matisse, embracing Persian miniatures is a way of making Western easel painting exotic while staying inside the Western tradition. Persian miniatures, like easel paintings, are an outgrowth of Byzantine picture making, so that when an artist incorporates Persian-miniature ideas in an easel painting he is only replacing parts of the Byzantine heritage that European painting has generally overlooked.

In the next two Japanese figures, which Balthus worked on during half of the sixteen years he was Director of the French Academy in Rome, he goes much further afield, embracing a tradition that no other Western artist has even attempted to mine. *Japanese Figure with a Red Table* and *Japanese Figure with a Black Mirror* are a gigantic act of homage to the classical center of Japanese art, the picture scrolls of the Middle Ages, called Yamato-e, which may be to Japanese art what the High Renaissance is to Western art.

From the beginning of European interest in Japanese art in the mid-nineteenth century it was the popular side, represented by the Ukiyo-e prints, that engaged artists. In part this was because Ukiyo-e was the Japanese art most widely available in the West, but an even more crucial factor may have been that the Ukiyo-e artists, who had been absorbing Western influences into their work for years, were easier for Frenchmen to make some sense out of. The locked-in, graphic force of Ukiyo-e is not, in any event, what one feels in Balthus's Japanese figures. The ordering of space, the tawny surfaces punctuated by areas of dense, saturated black or color in the Balthus pictures evoke, more than anything else, the expansive yet disciplined world of the Yamato-e scroll paintings of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries.

To spend a few hours with reproductions of these great paintings is to drift into a world of supreme elegance. A solitary man, eyes closed in pleasure, plays a flute; a woman, her great kimono and long hair billowing about her, reads a book: they are half-seen, hidden behind the thin, papery walls of their palace homes. Everything—buildings, objects, figures—is caught in the flow of parallel diagonal planes that move up the surfaces of the scrolls: it's a tilted dream world. In the summa of the Yamato-e style, the great *Tale of Genji Picture Scroll* of the early twelfth century, the surface is a gleaming mosaic of deep-toned plum, green, and goldish brown areas that are opened up by the furlings and unfurlings of curtains and shades, the slidings of screens, and the courtly pageant of bowing, conversing figures. Heartbreaking beauty. In other scrolls, where the more subdued colors come close to the colors of Balthus's pictures, the soft, clear, gentle brush lines describe forms that have an explosive impact.

Yamato-e is an art whose courtly elegance is surpassed only by its formal rigor. It's the perfect aesthete's art, and when we have realized all this and then return to Balthus's Japanese pictures, it is with a sense of doors opening, of vistas revealed. What Balthus has done is to join the Yamato-e tradition with the Western tradition of the female nude. Out of the largely suppressed emotions of these scrolls, some of which depict the novelistic memoirs of court ladies, Balthus has distilled the quintessential image of a figure, light yet earthbound, attached to its palace world so strongly that it seems to crawl through it, as if standing up would represent too active a movement. In coming to the storytelling scrolls of the Yamato-e

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(some of which have texts) Balthus reveals again his passion for story art; in using for the paintings a surface more like a wall than a piece of paper, he proclaims his distance from the Japanese. Rock to their paper, fresco to their scroll.

When the Japanese figures were first shown in 1977, jammed into two caddy-corner walls that could barely hold them in the Pierre Matisse Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street, the crowds were fantastic. I think the sense of wonder many felt there was in the realization that this artist, working in isolation, had come up with a vision that gave real pictorial form to the minimalist sensibility running through all the arts—decor, fashion, etc.—in the 1970s. Considering the current obsession with things Japanese, Balthus seems almost a visionary. In these two pictures, and in the 1979 landscape *View from Montecalvello*—which is pure Yamato-e—Balthus makes of something long ago and far away a new kind of art.

The Metropolitan show contains only two paintings done since the 1977 Pierre Matisse show: *View from Montecalvello* and *Sleeping Nude* (1980). I saw the *Sleeping Nude* in Venice in 1980, where it was completely overwhelmed by another painting from the group of nudes that Balthus made after leaving Rome for Switzerland in 1977, *The Cat in the Mirror* (1977-80). Seeing *The Cat in the Mirror* in Venice was an unforgettable experience, for the girl, with her strange, greenish flesh, subtle smile, raised mirror, and thin limbs seemed to pass, before our eyes, right into the world of Titian and Correggio. *Getting Up* (1975-78) seems, in reproduction, similarly magnificent, and I now find *Sleeping Nude,* in its own bluish-mauvish way, enchanted.

The paintings are still coming out of Balthus's studio. At the back of the catalogue of the Pompidou exhibit, there is a very simple Morandi-ish still life from 1983 and two figures of very elongated, almost Mannerist young girls standing in empty rooms (1981-3). These two figures have a blunt, unromantic tone that seems a distinct improvement over the somewhat soft, too poignant quality of the *Nude in Profile* (1977) to which they are so clearly related. The most unusual of the new paintings, though, is *The Painter and His Model* (1980-1). We are in the artist's studio, where the simple lines of the furniture are exactly the same as they were forty-five years before. The model, dressed, kneels in front of a chair, leafing through some sort of book or album. Behind her, with his back both to her and to us, the painter stands, looking out of the window. It's a painting of disaffection, almost of rebellion. Gone are the industrious figures of Velázquez in his *Las Meninas* and of Courbet in his *Artist's Studio.* Balthus reveals himself the prototypical modern artist, sundered from the clear demands of vocation, trapped in the perpetual getting-down-to-work. It's in some ways a devastating self-portrait, and when I first saw a reproduction of it while leafing through a Balthus book in a bookstore, it came as a real surprise. But then Balthus has always had it in him to surprise. He's an artist who can make you reconsider, rethink, connect things in new ways. How lucky we are to have this large, fine retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum. And how lucky we are, as we leave the Museum, where the big banner flying over the entrance is a Balthus banner, to be able to ask ourselves, "What will he do next?"

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The novel in the academy: a paean to perplexity

by Bruce Bawer

Until recently, if you wanted to know all about contemporary American novels without actually having to read any of them, you went to the library and paged through a dozen or so critical studies, among them Tony Tanner's *City of Words,* Leslie Fiedler's *Waiting for the End,* and Ihab Hassan's *Radical Innocence.* These were all nice, manageable books, tightly organized, neatly argued, their theses lucidly expressed in their opening sections and reasonably well developed thereafter, through the course of eight or ten chapters that dealt briefly and precisely with fifteen or twenty major novels. Some were better written than others, some more incisive or entertaining; but each had a clear reason for existing, for each had a somewhat different way of looking at things. These were *civilized* books, which co-existed peacefully in the same territory, and their authors nodded at each other every once in a while, acknowledging each other's work genially and accepting their unavoidable differences with equanimity. To read through them, one after another, was to walk from window to window in a single house, looking out at the same landscape from a series of different perspectives.

Enter *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* by Frederick R. Karl.[1] Several times the size of most of its predecessors, it is patently designed to eliminate the need for Tanner's and Fiedler's and Hassan's window views (which, according to Karl, "all fall short . . . of being sufficiently inclusive") and to replace them with a single magnificently detailed aerial photograph of this rich, if inadequately charted, stretch of literary terrain. For every novel covered by Tanner or Fiedler, *American Fictions* covers ten: not only *The Naked and the Dead* but *Guard of Honor* and *The Young Lions* and *Dog Soldiers*; not only *The Adventures of Augie March* but *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March;* not only *Dangling Man* but *The Ginger Man* and *My Life as a Man* and *The Man Who Cried I Am.* There is no question but that Professor Karl wants us to look at this massive object—with its two columns per page of small print, its dustjacket on which the title is spelled out in imposingly serifed one-hundred-point crimson caps, and its comprehensive-looking list of contents on the back cover—and decide at once that this is *the* definitive study of the postwar American novel, the only book substantial enough to consider all the novels, to draw all the connections, to consolidate all the perspectives.

As it turns out, however, *American Fictions* is a foolishly conceived and poorly executed book that adds virtually nothing to Tanner, Fiedler, and the rest of the crop. Karl establishes his thesis (not to mention his penchant for nebulous abstractions and clumsy turns of phrase) in the book's first paragraph:

1 *American Fictions 1940-1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation,* by Frederick R. Karl; Harper & Row, 637 pages, $32.50.

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> The American novel since the Second World War is, obviously, that fiction which came after 1945; but it is also more than a body of work in chronological sequence. In attitudes, recognitions, ideologies, disturbances, and techniques, it is a fiction that molded itself to postatomic ideas and responses and reached out to become something new. We have an era, really sustained for the first time, of what we may broadly call "American modernism," the rough equivalent in fiction of abstract expressionism or action painting, of the *nouvelle vague* in cinema, of the post-Pound-Williams era in poetry, of serial and electronic music, of increasing forms of abstraction which have characterized all the arts. On the stage, where our cultural ideas are visualized more directly, the bare, abstract, symbolic look is part of this general movement. Theater manifested the perfect expression of the era in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—in language, characters, themes, staging, even clothes. In all its diversity, the postwar novel has striven for precisely this achievement: to defamiliarize the world, and while moving the human experience to the margins, to move the margins toward the center.

Though, to me at least, parts of this paragraph are meaningless, the essential message is clear: "Make it new." This is, of course, Ezra Pound's phrase, and Karl seems to see himself as something of a Poundian figure, encouraging literary experiment wherever he finds it. But F. K. is no E. P. His philosophy of literature simply doesn't go very far *beyond* "Make it new." "We must never forget," he writes, "that Gide found Proust unintelligible, a poor writer of French; that early readers of *Ulysses* reeled without guidelines; that 'The Waste Land' remained impenetrable for years." True enough, and the lesson these facts teach us is that we should not dismiss the unfamiliar out of hand, that we should always remember that great literature can turn up in all sorts of places. But Karl draws another lesson entirely: he thinks that the more impenetrable a novel is, the greater the likelihood that it's *real literature*. Difficulty, in other words, is the cardinal sign of great contemporary literature.

Most of us, I suspect, have known English professors whose sentiments tended in this direction. They are academics through and through, who consider a novel to be, above all, its author's contribution to a symbiotic relationship with the academic community. This is how it works, if the relationship is successful: the academic critic publishes a paper about the novel, he gets promoted, he does a book, he receives tenure, he dies happy; the novelist, on his part, gets recognition in the groves of academe, his own entry in the *MLA Bibliography,* and his own session at the MLA Convention, and eventually becomes part of the "canon"—an immortal. Now, if this symbiosis is to function smoothly, what the novelist owes the academic more than anything else is a novel that contains enough material to work with. It has to be complicated. It has to require *figuring out.* And this, of course, is where the academic's half of the bargain comes in: he must crack the code, find the solution to the jumble. Not, note well, because he truly understands and is devoted to modernist ideals, or to any ideals that involve a conception of literary art whereby a given work may be difficult to apprehend because it seeks to represent with complete fidelity the magnificent complexity of life. No, it's pure pragmatism. Publish or perish.

Presumably, Professor Frederick R. Karl of New York University (whose list of publications reaches back a quarter of a century) is past the stage at which he must publish or perish. Yet his attitude is very much that of the enigma-happy junior scholar. To him, the novelist who writes something that puzzles the bejesus out of everybody is a hero, and the one who writes something lucid and lovely and moving is a viper. But Karl isn't merely another academic looking for something to analyze. No, Karl is now one of those newest-of-the-new academics who pride themselves on writing a lot of words, but who say very little of substance about the work of literature under discussion. A great contemporary novel, to him, is not simply

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one that requires figuring out, but one that *defies* figuring out—at least by him—so that to discuss it is not to analyze it but simply to admire, in a redundant and superficial manner, the way its chaotic text manages to reflect the anarchy of our age. To Karl, the superhero of the past four decades is indubitably William Gaddis, and the finest American novel of our day is Gaddis's supremely enigmatic megabook *JR,* which Karl reverently refers to as an "inaccessible triumph." Its importance is manifest from the very first page, apparently, for its beginning "is one of the most deliberately confusing in literature," and the confusion—to Gaddis's credit—"continues for pages, with names slipped in that mean nothing, the speaker unidentified. The reader struggles not only for identification of the speakers, or for the information, but for some thread of argument which connects these discrete pieces of material." After a few pages of this sort of thing, "without warning, different speakers appear. Words and voices, however, seem disembodied. Location, direction, content are unclear."

This, apparently, is what a "maker of literature" in the postwar period makes. According to Karl, we have had only a handful of these fellows during the past four decades, and their names are William Gaddis, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, John Hawkes, Donald Barthelme, William Burroughs, and Joseph McElroy.[2] The quality that these novelists seem to share above all others, at least as Karl sees them, is their insistence upon talking not to their readers but to themselves. For this, Karl congratulates them warmly. "In *JR,*" he enthuses, "Gaddis is so unbending, and, one must add, obsessive, that the reader is forgotten." In *Letters,* John Barth engages in nearly unparalled "self-indulgence" and "probe[s] new modes of perception, however tedious the process." And in a novella by John Hawkes,

> words pour out, as though the writer has forgotten us or assumes we know where he is heading, where he came from. There is none of the traditional information or linkage, as in Bellow, Mailer, or Malamud . . . . By way of disconnections and disruptions, the novelist—and the reader by implication—is doing no more than experiencing Emerson's dictum: "the *all in each* of human nature," the universal residing in each individual, by way of intuition. The novelist must move along lines of that intuition, even when it leads toward disaster.

Yes, it is a fine thing for the novelist to tap away at the collective unconscious, to follow his instincts; but Karl is altogether too thrilled by the disasters into which the tedious, self-indulgent, deliberately confusing "instincts" of certain contemporary novelists have led them, and too deprecatory of the genuine achievements of novelists who have made masterly uses of conventional methods of exploring character and culture, or whose experiments have taken more modest or subtle or successful forms than those favored by Karl's ruling deities. This is a critic who does not hesitate to praise something by Hawkes for its "resistance to clarity"—as if clarity were some dread disease that infects literature with mediocrity—and who shouts his admiration of Hawkes's ability to create "a dim outline, like the lines of a palimpsest."

It takes a while to get the hang of the topsy-turvy philosophy of this book, but one eventually does, and when one reads that Flannery O'Connor "resembles John Hawkes, although she is far less experimental or daring in her arrangements and in her demand upon the reader" (and that is as subtle and probing an analysis as any writer gets in this book), one knows immediately that the verdict is in—O'Connor is a lesser writer than Hawkes. The formula is simple: less daring plus less demanding equals less distinguished.

2 Flannery O'Connor is also on his list, but merely (one suspects) as a token female; his discussion of her work makes it clear that he doesn't regard her as highly as he does the others. The reason for this should be obvious.

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Virtually the only consistent thing about *American Fictions* is Karl's mania for muddle. It ruins the book, and causes one to hope fervently that *American Fictions* does not become general issue in undergraduate English classes. To teach students to admire effective works that are the product of modernist experimentation is one thing; but to instruct them in the perverse belief that incoherence is the surest sign of literary distinction is quite another. If one wishes to believe that *JR* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are among the best novels of our day, very well; but they are not great because of their inaccessibility. Great works succeed by rising above the impediments to comprehension that the composition of a deeply and comprehensively conceived work has forced upon them; they do not succeed as a result of those impediments. Karl's problem is that he is impressed by reckless literary risk-taking whatever the circumstances—no matter whether it happens to have a purpose, no matter whether it pays off or falls flat. He ridicules the members of a *Commentary* symposium for thinking themselves "too fine" for the "not so brave new world" of contemporary letters into which they've awakened, but he goes ridiculously far in the other direction, eagerly running after anything that strikes him as "the rough equivalent in fiction of abstract impressionism or action painting, of the *nouvelle vague* in cinema." He calls to mind the poetry editor of an undergraduate literary magazine who described the sole standard by which he selected poems for publication as follows: "I pick the ones that are *weird*."

American Fictions is itself, of course, a good example of *nouvelle vague* criticism. Granted, it *looks* well organized, with its chapters on "American Space and Spatiality," "The Persistence of Pastoral," "The War and the Novel—Before and After," "Growing Up in America: The 1940s and Thereafter," "The Counterfeit Decade," "The Possibilities of Minimalism," "The Nonfiction Novel," and so forth. These are, for the most part, understandable subdivisions for a study of contemporary American literature. But the framework results in anarchy. The discussions of a single writer's novels are likely to be spread over several chapters, depending on (a) when they were written, (b) which form (minimalist, nonfiction novel) they supposedly exhibit, and (c) which theme (counterfeiting, politics, etc.) Karl thinks of as dominating each book. Thus, of Saul Bellow's nine novels, the first (*Dangling Man*) and second (*The Victim*) are examined in Chapter Four; the third (*The Adventures of Augie March*) in Chapter Five; the fourth (*Seize the Day*), sixth (*Herzog*), and seventh (*Mr. Sammler's Planet*) in Chapter Eight; the fifth (*Henderson the Rain King*) and ninth (*The Dean's December*) in Chapter Seven; the eighth (*Humboldt's Gift*) in Chapter Eleven. Because of this format, Karl is unable to develop a coherent, accurate picture of any postwar novelist's *oeuvre* and must pepper his text with clumsy cross-references. For example, a footnote to a discussion of a James Purdy novel tells us, "In the section 'Growing Up in America,' I discuss his two earlier works, *Malcolm* and *The Nephew*." And a passage about Jerzy Kosinski's recent novels begins, "*The Painted Bird* and *Steps* (see 'Growing Up in America' and 'The Possibilities of Minimalism') are the two coordinates of Jerzy Kosinski's fiction."

Such crudities would be acceptable if Karl's chapter divisions were especially useful. But they're not. Besides the fact that he adds almost nothing to what other critics have said about such subjects as space and spatiality, the pastoral, and the American political novel, Karl exaggerates the decade-to-decade thematic modulations to an absurd extent, expecting us to accept the notion that a wide variety of writers were all concentrating in the 1940s upon the theme of growing up, and that the same writers switched in the 1950s to the counterfeiting motif. He makes too many such black-and-white distinctions. For example, "The major problem of the novelist in the 1960s was that there seemed to be too many realities. In the 1970s, the problem has shifted, in that it has become too difficult to determine

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what, if anything, reality really is; where it lies; what shape it takes; where, if anywhere, it is heading." And:

> [*Native Son*] has many lives. It has its 1930s life as a novel about class, caste, and race; it has its reverberations in war novels of the late 1940s, so that we can look back at *Native Son* as Wright's version of a combat novel; it has its life in the 1950s and 1960s as a book that says critical things about black-white relationships and the victimization of poor blacks; it has its parallel cultural life in the attacks made on Wright by blacks themselves—Baldwin, among others.

In the first two or three thousand words of a typical chapter in *American Fictions,* Karl discusses the theme, mode, and/or period with which the chapter is concerned; the remainder of the chapter is a series of mostly unconnected one- to three-thousand-word segments about individual novels. Every so often, Karl takes a stab at tying a novel thematically into the chapter in which he has placed it. This is usually not very effectively done, even when there is a legitimate reason for the placement. Karl places *Lolita,* for instance, in Chapter Six, "The Counterfeit Decade," which is about novels of the 1950s. "Everything about *Lolita,*" writes Karl, "is parodic, a celebration of the counterfeit; its methods based on mirrors and reflections." Reading this, one cries out for examples; but there are none. Indeed, it is often the case that a two- or three-thousand-word-long passage on a novel will contain only a sentence or two of quotation from the novel. Thus, unless one has already read *Lolita* and perceived the genuine significance of mirror images in the novel—in which case, of course, one doesn't need to hear about it from Karl—the mention of these reflections in *American Fictions* is meaningless. Even when Karl does support his observations, he almost never answers the obvious questions they raise. Why, for instance, is Nabokov concerned with the theme of the counterfeit? How does it function in *Lolita*? What does it contribute to the structure, the meaning, the beauty, the human force of the novel? None of these questions is of much interest to Karl. To him, his job is not to elucidate the purpose of the counterfeiting motif in *Lolita,* but to impress upon us (somewhere in his swarm of generalizations about the novel) that *Lolita* is "a celebration of the counterfeit" and, in turn, that the 1950s were a "counterfeit decade." If one really wants to understand *Lolita,* one must turn to the novel itself or to another book of criticism, such as Tony Tanner's *City of Words,* which offers a fine discussion of Nabokov's symbolism.

Karl himself would have done well to turn now and again to *City of Words,* or to any of several other critical studies. But he hasn't. Somehow he sees no urgent need to take the work of other critics into account. If he quotes from the novels rarely, he quotes even less often from his fellow critics. The few critics whose work he does make use of are not the best, either: they seem to be trendy, gimmicky ones, such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, whose *The Madwoman in the Attic* (like *American Fictions,* an attempt to force a number of authors into a highly contrived view of things) keeps cropping up in Karl's chapter on "The Female Experience."

With a few exceptions, then, Karl's critical comments are entirely his own. This one can hardly doubt, for they all strike one, with great force, as the products of a single mind. For example: "It is unlikely that a woman could write a novel of combat." "Bullfighting and big-game hunting are not ordinarily accessible to a Jewish writer." "While high art in the 1950s was identified with the Eastern Seaboard, lifestyles were the prerogative of the West Coast." "[Jazz's] lack of verbal content was essential to its impact as a purely aural form of experience." Karl disputes at length Elizabeth Hardwick's bleak description of Automat food in her novel *Sleepless Nights,* contending that "the Automat was quite different [from the way Hardwick portrays it]; the macaroni, actually, was a superb dish for the price." And he ridicules the "proliferation of designations" among writers:

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> Among black writers alone, we have black Americans, Afro-Americans, Negroes, then subdivisions for each sex; among Jews, we find Jewish-Americans, Jewish novelists, subdivisions into male and female, occasionally further subdivisions into the particular Jewish orientation—German, Eastern European, Sephardic, and eventually we can expect South American Jews, North African Jews, Israelis, and so on.

There is, Karl states flatly, no such thing as a "Jewish novel"; yet he is constantly talking about "Jewish writers," and refers at one point to the "Jewish violence" that he finds in their work.

Bullfighting, jazz, Automat macaroni—sometimes it seems as if Karl will go off on any tangent to avoid writing about literature. He draws his prime example of 1950s schizophrenia, for example, not from literature but from rock and roll: "Elvis Presley, whom many Americans in the 1950s epitomized [*sic*] as dissolute, crummy, and shabby, saw himself as clean-cut, patriotic, indeed, supernationalistic." Oddly enough, Karl develops this trifling observation at greater length than he does some of his most important ones, devoting more than two paragraphs to Presley's antipathy toward the Beatles, the Smothers Brothers, and Jane Fonda, and the singer's affection for J. Edgar Hoover, to whom he offered his services as an informer. To help support his notion of the Fifties as a decade dominated by the themes of counterfeit (as explored in Gaddis's *The Recognitions*) and invisibility (Ellison's *Invisible Man*), Karl writes that "Presley reaches back to Whittaker Chambers, early in the 1950s, and works the line of counterfeit and invisibility." This is, by the way, hardly the most bizarre connection drawn in *American Fictions*; at various points, Karl manages to see what he thinks of as illuminating symbolic links between Patty Hearst and *Native Son,* Senator McCarthy and Mike Hammer, the Reverend Jim Jones and *Cat's Cradle.*

Perhaps Karl's favorite form of critical analysis is name-interpretation. In some novels, such as *Lolita,* the characters' names are indeed significant. But whereas Karl comments briefly on the name of John Ray, Jr., Ph.D., the "editor" (actually a creation of Nabokov) whose name is appended to the novel's preface, and on the name of Humbert Humbert, he doesn't bother to interpret the names of Lolita, Quilty, or Mrs. Haze—all of which are an integral part of Nabokov's scheme. But, again, Karl isn't interested in fitting the elements of *Lolita* together to see the grand picture; he's merely concerned with making random points about the novel, enough to justify classifying it as a work concerned with the theme of counterfeiting. Most of his name-interpretations seem off-the-cuff: "Augie is not Augustus or august, but *Augie,* a name for a man of the people; he must march." "Alexander (not the Great, not the son of Philip) Portnoy must somehow escape his House Beautiful scene to become his own person. This is the primal theme of growing up fiction." All right, though; the insights may not be anything to write home about, and the prose may make one squirm, but this sort of name-play is tolerable enough. Unfortunately, Karl doesn't stop at interpreting the names of characters; he interprets the names of *authors.* He makes a point of saying that Jerzy Kosinski has "a name like Joseph K." And he doesn't even stop there. Buried in the notes at the back of the book is a reference to Bert Parks, who, "with his Thoreauvian name . . . MC's Miss America contests!"

That Karl can be so comfortable using the word "MC"—as a *verb,* yet—brings us to another problem with *American Fictions*: namely, that Karl doesn't choose his words as well as he might. He overuses the word *compelling* and describes virtually everything, at one time or another, as *archetypal* or *prototypical* of everything else. But the main problem is simply a clumsy style. Karl wants desperately to be verbally agile, but he keeps tripping himself up. He refers to the 1950s as "a difficult time to grow up, but an excellently manured garden for fiction to develop

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in." On *Cat's Cradle*: "Once we get past some of the charming words Vonnegut has conceived, Bokononism is a sentimentalized belief full of the author's sweetness and generosity." On *Catcher in the Rye*: "Puking is a source of fun, or male genitals." On Saul Bellow: "In his *Paris Review* interview, Bellow stated his preference for nineteenth-century realism, of which Dreiser is a major American proponent. Favoring this kind of novel, which includes the Russians, has preempted Bellow's development in the postwar years." On God knows what: "The ordinary magnified can be the stuff of a life experienced on the edge of a precipice." On *Why Are We in Vietnam?*: "In a passage as if written by William Burroughs in a drug-induced hallucinatory state, Mailer binds old and new America." On Alan Friedman's *Hermaphrodeity*: "We have a not so mild pornographic stress to the book."

Not that Karl minds pornography. Indeed, as I am now regrettably compelled to demonstrate, he goes out of his way to prove that he is not afraid of vulgarity. He refers to Norman Mailer's hero Rojack as a "cocksman," speaks of the middle-class concern with "the perfect fuck" (which he then compares unfavorably with Eldridge Cleaver's desire to "rape white woman," as described in *Soul on Ice*), says that a character in Lisa Alther's *Kinflicks* "screws like a piston rod," observes that in *Gravity's Rainbow* "the environment is shit," suggests that Henry Miller "tried to set a literary fucking record," describes the "sense of past beshitting future" in Barth's *Letters,* and discusses Bellow's attitude toward "blacks, with their big cocks." Indeed, the first sentence of the first chapter of *American Fictions* throws all inhibitions down the chute: "America as shit, America as shit-producer, America as beshitten, America as a gigantic asshole out of which energy and waste pour, Texans as the biggest assholes of them all—such are the ways of explaining why we were in Vietnam." And such are the ways of all too many academic critics these days, who think that the best way to be "relevant" and "in touch with the times" is to fill their ivory towers with ordure.

The simplicity of Karl's philosophy, and the less-than-illuminating quality of his commentary, are perhaps well demonstrated by his remarks on that novel of novels, *JR*. Karl's thirty-five-hundred-word discussion of Gaddis's book begins with the statement that

> the key part here is the method: interrupted conversation, incomplete lines of thought, a shorthand language; language that no longer serves its traditional functions. Gaddis has tried to put gesture and expression into the written word. But it is, also, the language we feed into computers, set phrases programmed for rapidity, where our interst lies only in the printout.

Questions: (1) If Gaddis's language doesn't serve its traditional functions, what functions *does* it serve? (2) What's so special about trying to put gesture and expression into the written word? Doesn't every writer try to do this? (3) Why is the language of computers appropriate to novels? Karl does not answer any of these immediately, but after a two-paragraph digression he looks as if he is about to. Gaddis, he says, "has found a form, a language as well as a focus for his view of postwar America." *Terrific,* we think, *here comes an answer.* But no. Rather than develop this theme, Karl gives us another impromptu paean to perplexity: "Many devices from *The Recognitions* remain. The withholding of vital information is crucial; for the retention of material creates a pressure on the reader. We are caught, in a guessing game, a suspense drama, a purely dramatic action. Postponement, as in drama, is the key; we push against unknowns."

And for the next two paragraphs, Karl continues to pay tribute to the intentional confusion of *JR*, to the magnificent fact that its "location, direction, content are unclear." Eventually, he says, the reader becomes aware of the title character, bobbing now and then out of Gaddis's fog of prose. But Karl is quick to reassure us that JR, far from the fully realized individual that the hacks would give us, is instead a "shadowy

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schoolboy" who "rarely comes clearly into focus. He is a sixth grader, and a full-faced portrait, Gaddis realized, would be of little interest. Moving in shadows, however, he can be a giant, the mastermind of a vast corporate enterprise, something it takes us hundreds of pages to identify." What we are dealing with in *American Fictions* is a critic who finds the depiction of "a vast corporate enterprise" more interesting than the depiction of a human being, and who considers the magnitude of a fictional character to have less to do with the precision and comprehensiveness with which the author has evoked him on the page than with the position in the world of business that his creator has accorded him.

Karl goes on to explain that the gold in *Das Rheingold,* a production of which figures importantly in the novel, reminds one of the shares of stock mentioned at the beginning of *JR*, and that when we notice this connection, "we begin to perceive a theme [*sacre bleu!*], although unassociated with any particular characters. [What a relief!] Just as in *Das Rheingold* the Gold of the Rhine will dominate the opera and the entire Ring, so money will open and close the cycles of *JR*."

Fine. So tell us, what does Gaddis have to say about money? How does it affect the characters' thoughts and feelings and lives and relationships? Karl appears to be on the brink of telling us. "About 75,000 words into the novel," he writes, "we have our first clear indication of what is going to be significant." Wonderful. *What*? But Karl's not going to stick even his tiniest toe beneath the surface of these waters, if he can help it. Instead he quotes JR's speech about his idea for a "selling outfit." The purpose is not to give us an insight into the thematic underpinning of *JR* but to set up yet another chorus of approbation. "This is one of JR's few long speeches," Karl says,

> and it is interspersed with interrupted sentences, a printout or shorthand method. The long sequences are fluid and of a conversational ordinariness which is remarkable. Gaddis's execution is merciless; more than satirical, the style strikes at the heart of every type of communication. Later, a radio plays because the turn-off knob cannot be reached. It catches our attention in small bursts, then fades. Our speech patterns are similar: people listen, then stop, then are caught up in their own speech, interrupt, are interrupted, and the cycle renews itself on human self-indulgence. We hear, ultimately, our own thought patterns, which we attempt to relocate in a language that is strangled before it reaches fulfillment. Counterfeit thoughts become part of an oral tradition.

Karl moves on to the subject of Gaddis's humor, but the litany of praise continues. "There are scenes [in *JR*] that are among the most hilarious in American fiction, despite this being a doom-filled vision." In a rare attempt to support an opinion, Karl offers a quite unfunny bit of *JR*, in which the humor is apparently supposed to derive from the mention of cartons containing "24—One Pint Mazola New Improved 36 Boxes 200 2-Ply" and "Wise Potato Chips Hoppin' with Flavor"—exactly the sort of thing that the most humorless sort of English professor perceives as humorous. Needless to say, Karl doesn't entertain any of the important questions suggested by his discovery of humor in *JR*, among them: (1) What part—structurally, thematically—does humor play in this "doom-filled" novel? (2) At whose expense—a character, an institution, a philosophy—does the humor take place? (3) Essentially what sort of humor is it—social satire or political farce? Shavian? Shakespearean? Does it bear any resemblance to the "American humor" described by Constance Rourke in her book of that title? Is it a humor of jokes or character or situation? Rather than answer any of these questions, Karl recapitulates his main theme. "This is incomparable comedy," he opines, "although for the reader to reach it, he must come through a verbal and narrative obstacle course." So what else is new? Once more, Karl congratulates Gaddis for his lack of interest in his readers, for "carrying on an

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extended, obsessively detailed dialogue with himself; he is the programmer and he receives the printout. All voices echo, a true universe of words, a parallel phenomenon to *Gravity's Rainbow.*" (Interesting, how you can be such an original experimenter and still be doing pretty much the same thing as somebody else.)

After a few more sentences praising *JR*'s self-directed prose, the lack of dimension in the title character, and the novel's "remarkable" central concept ("that with the telephone and mails, money can be made by any marginal operator, by a sixth grader, through a self-perpetuating system") Karl again begins to tell us, in a memorably bad sentence, what all this is supposed to add up to: "Gaddis stresses the depersonalization of moneymaking as part of the waste land in which people operate and thrive." But rather than develop this observation, Karl tells us that this sense of depersonalization is conveyed most effectively by—and, yes, here he goes again, telling us for what seems the hundredth time about Gaddis's difficult, disordered prose, his

> demonic way with conversational gambits: interrupted speech, run-together names and statements, broken-off phrases and barely uttered words, an oral shorthand. As in *The Recognitions,* we must pick up speakers from the situation and their words; but here the torrent of language pouring over us makes identification more difficult. In terms of language, Gaddis has tried to do for the oral American idiom what Joyce did for the written English—rediscover it as a literary voice, defamiliarize it so it seems fresh. His is the poetry, flow, and rhythm of routine speech, as much code as communication.

And (as a novelist whom Karl considers infinitely inferior to Gaddis might say) so it goes. Karl commends *JR* for its lack of a "sense of direction," and for its "verbiage [which] permits no clear definition." The climax comes when Karl brings in Pynchon, Gaddis's runner-up in the *American Fictions* sweepstakes, and tells us that both writers "do not use language to enter an interior world where all is self, narcissism, or indulgence; but as a way of exploring the outer reaches of language where it blurs into disorder. Their verbal construct is not a hiding behind words as a shield but the forcing of words outward, where language and things merge into each other." I'm not sure what some of this is supposed to mean, but it sounds as if Karl may be trying to suggest that the reason he refuses to take us beneath the jumbled surface of *JR* is that in the second half of the twentieth century neither critic nor novelist should be concerned with probing beneath surfaces, that the contemporary American novel at its best is a word game, pure and simple (or, rather, polluted and murky), which reflects the frenetic nature of the contemporary American relationships that really matter—not those between people, but those between corporations. Yes, corporations. Gaddis and Pynchon may well be "social and political novelists," but what that means to Karl is that they are "quite concerned with external worlds, whether America itself as a corporate empire, in *JR*, or as part of a multinational cartel, as in *Gravity's Rainbow.*" He goes on:

> Their barrages of words, like Pynchon's rockets, are centrifugal, not centripetal forces. The impersonality of *JR* results from Gaddis's construction of a huge "outer world" with an existence of its own; in that world, which spans two decades, we find an entire value system, not a retreat from it . . . . For both Gaddis and Pynchon, the corporate empire embodies tremendous energy . . . . Both may parody finance, capitalism, the corporation, but they see in that a form of existence which gives real meaning to individual lives. While it may, in its multiplicity and energies, bury the individual, it also engages him.

The remark about corporations "bury[ing] the individual" must be ironic, coming from a critic to whom "a full-faced portrait" of a real human being holds far less interest than "a small, impersonal title character" who

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takes his identity from "a vast corporate enterprise."

Karl's admiration for Gaddis, Pynchon, and company is matched only by his disdain for writers like Kurt Vonnegut, John Updike, Norman Mailer, and "even Bellow," who "have capitalized on the fact that a few others have kept the novel alive while they fiddle and garner prizes."[3] Karl seems to feel that Pynchon has been neglected by academic critics largely because he has avoided the limelight, while Mailer has been overpraised because he has courted fame. (Considering that Pynchon, the author of three books, is listed in the 1981 *MLA Bibliography* as the subject of forty critical and scholarly studies, and Mailer, the author of twenty-odd books, is the subject of only seven such articles, this charge of neglect is a peculiar one.) Vonnegut, the writer on Karl's blacklist whose work is marked by the greatest clarity and cult popularity, is predictably the victim of Karl's deepest digs. "With others doing the real work, Vonnegut can continue to publish his fictions under the protective mantle of the novel without really writing anything but 'prose fictions.'" Translation: Vonnegut is inexcusably readable. Or, as Karl puts it in his discussion of *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,* "The problem with the novel is obviousness." That is, to Karl's way of thinking, all that need be said. He seems to harbor a real hostility toward writers like Vonnegut, whom he sees as failing in their responsibility to create truly difficult fictions and thus to give academics something to do.

Karl condemns John Irving for a related offense: his narrative line is too strong. "We should not confuse ourselves," Karl says, "that narrative is necessarily the place where literature is located." The trouble with current academic criticism, of course, is not that too many critics think narrative is necessary to literature, but that too many of them, like Karl, think its presence a hindrance to literature and its absence a boon. (Elsewhere in *American Fictions,* Karl congratulates John Barth for recognizing that "storytelling belongs to a fictional type that no longer reflects who and what we are." Of course, he never gets around to explaining exactly who and what we are; that would be too centripetal of him.) Karl damns *The World According to Garp* as a "good read," and to him this means it cannot possibly be anything else as well. He assumes the book to be simpleminded because of the form it takes, and so gives it a simpleminded reading. He sees no thematic *raison d'être* in this novel whose thematic *raison d'être* is embarrassingly clear, and thus resorts to describing it as a "crazy quilt," a more or less random job of "moving eccentric characters around on a board." Ironically, Karl, a lover of ambiguities, complains about *Garp*'s ambiguities: why, he carps, are there so many tragic events in a novel that is, in large part, so jocular in tone? Unable to figure this out, Karl is forced to write off these tragic events —which are central to the book's plot and theme, and which include the violent deaths of the hero, his mother, and his son—as "isolated instances of terror," and to sum up *Garp,* whose second half is imbued with numbing existential despair (and whose last sentence is, "In the world according to Garp, we are all terminal cases"), by saying that "most of all, it conveys good feeling." Question: If Karl is so obtuse about such a simple, undeceptive book as *The World According to Garp,* how can we even begin to take seriously his judgments regarding such shady customers as *JR* and *Gravity's Rainbow*?

Predictably, Karl has little regard for a fine prose style, and when he does notice good writing he finds some reason to complain about it. No sooner does he describe William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as "a beautifully crafted and written novel" than he suggests that, thanks to the gorgeous writing, "authenticity is lost . . . . Turner drowns in another man's language." The complaint is defensible, but that this is

3 No doubt Mailer's huge, daunting *Ancient Evenings,* published too late to be considered in *American Fictions,* would have raised Mailer's position in Karl's eyes.

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one of Karl's most visible comments on style speaks volumes. He comments similarly upon Updike, whose prose in *The Coup,* though it "has rarely been better . . . works at cross-purposes with the need for wit, or lightness. The prose takes the high road." The simple truth is that Karl is uncomfortable with fine prose. It bothers him. It indicates, on the part of the writer, an unpleasant awareness that somebody is going to read him, and an ugly determination to make sense, rather than chaos, of contemporary life. And most of all it signifies the writer's feeling that he is *not* a computer producing a printout, but a human being speaking to other human beings about what it means to be a human being. Than which—to Professor Frederick R. Karl, who unfortunately is not alone in his opinion—there is no greater literary crime in America today.

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Relativities: pages from a notebook

by David Paul

No creative work is based on ideas? Creative work grows from some vital principle, some indefinable urge, which may seem to involve ideas, or the feelings they provoke. A whole class of literate, intelligent people who are not writers have a tendency to hit on a "wonderful idea" for a play, a poem, or a story. They may feel that such an idea has a generative force that would create a masterpiece, if only . . . But the trouble is that the "idea" in question is often as self-contained as a bubble, exists for its own sake, and refuses to generate anything. Where a play or a novel can be said to be based on one overmastering idea (and it can't be said so very often) it may well be that the idea was the last thing arrived at, something incidental to what the writer was groping for and couldn't really *see* or articulate until the fabric as a whole was completed.

The dexter and the sinister self: When do they part? Where do they meet? Every writer who achieves a certain wholeness contrives at some point in the development of his work to isolate, expose, and denounce his *alter ego*. Shakespeare-Hamlet despises, singles out, and casually kills Shakespeare-Polonius. Yeats from first to last was aware of his ridiculous other self, beginning with the image created by his "mockers," in the "mirror of malicious eyes," going on to that glance at himself as "one that ruffled in a manly pose,/For all his timid heart," and in later years as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man." (All this makes a telling contrast with T. S. Eliot's perpetual readjustment of the mask of self-deprecation and "humility.") More than once, Baudelaire in his poems and journals turns his venom on his own dilettante-Hamlet image, and there is systematic self-rebuke in the journals—for idleness, eating without appetite, passivity, dreaming, and the obsessive reluctance to *begin* work. He was continually aware of and struggling with his own "imp of the perverse." So too was Dostoevsky, on his own tremendously lavish scale. Which of the Karamazov brothers is he *not*? Perhaps he is more Ivan than Alyosha, but the two characters are equally convincing. He is there too inside the Gambler. Perhaps he exposes the worst of his possible selves in Smerdyakov, or perhaps in Svidrigailov? At the opposite extreme, that most judicious, most classically balanced of all novelists, Jane Austen, has her moments of reaction, self-rebuke. A vital part of her magic is her change of moral atmosphere from one novel to the next. Her heroine Emma Woodhouse would cut an odd figure as an intruder in the subtly pre-Victorian, closed world of *Mansfield Park*: she would be seen as slightly vulgar, self-assured, for all her wealth and position. It is in *Mansfield Park* that the author pins down something of herself in the character of Mary Crawford. She has more wit than any other character in the book, and a charm

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akin to that of her reprehensible brother. But ultimately if gradually she has to be condemned as a frivolous, husband-hunting butterfly—with her eminent naval connections, her "Rears and Vices," as she calls them. But "husband-hunting butterfly" is exactly how a casual acquaintance who knew her when she was twenty described the author herself. And she too had her naval connections . . .

The career of Freud was a lifelong struggle between the creative impulse, the will to impose a form, and the scientific will to find out, prove, and demonstrate. These were the two opposing forces whose tension created the structural laws of his theories. Invalidate one or the other, and the architecture of his thought begins to totter. Of all his books, *Totem and Taboo* is the one in which the two forces are most inextricably bound, in order to produce the most precipitous—and in the end the least convincing—structure. Equally illuminating is his account of an unfinished case history, that of the woman he calls Dora. The piece might have been subtitled "The One That Got Away." It is clear from Freud's account that Dora was an intelligent person with a will and insights of her own. It isn't reading too much between the lines to see that, as the treatment progressed, Dora felt herself to be increasingly manipulated, *willed* into dreaming thus and thus, into having the expected reactions, producing from her mind and memory symptoms that would fit into the already established elements of that structural plan of the human psyche and its forces which it was Freud's life work to test, elaborate, and perfect. Did this particular patient feel and resent a growing hypnotic grip in the analyst's approach, a reductive force making her more a specimen (with perhaps interesting variations), more a "case," than an individual? Freud's career had begun with tests of hypnosis treatment, which had already proved to have a limited success with some hysterical patients. Even when his own method of eliciting what he felt were the causes of neurosis from the sifted evidence of the patient's life story, dreams, and conversation had become fully developed, the hypnotic element (however latent) in the relationship between analyst and patient seems always to have persisted.

It is curious how the personalities of three pre-eminent Jewish artists and thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have arrived, each in his own way, at a sort of Mosaic identification. Freud is the most obvious instance. From mid-career onward he identified increasingly with his own idea of Moses the prophet and lawgiver. He meditated long on Michelangelo's heroic image of Moses. He felt that he too had established new Tables of the Law, brought down from the mountains of the intellect: like those of his great model, only more so, they were received with hostility, dismay, disgust. He saw himself as the bringer of a new system for understanding—and to a degree controlling—the laws of the human psyche, of human behavior. (In his letters he even suggests that the house where he lived while writing his first important book should have a memorial tablet to the effect that here lived the man who explained the meaning of dreams.) His own findings and edicts were to be absolute; any deviation by his disciples that hinted at disagreement or alteration was greeted with hysteria or fainting fits, and often by formal denunciation: dismissal from the fold of the new law.

Arnold Schoenberg had a similar obsession with *his* idea of Moses, who was to be the hero of his never-to-be-finished *magnum opus,* the opera *Moses und Aron.* Like nearly all German-Jewish musicians (Schnabel and Mahler are other signal examples), Schoenberg felt—and for him it was a fact, not merely a personal conviction—that the music of the German classical tradition was the *only* music worthy of intellectual consideration. In his manual of composition, the examples illustrating how to solve one problem or another are taken from the works of that exemplary artisan Brahms, and again

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Brahms, and again Brahms, who, for Schoenberg, appears to have been the master of those who know how. Next to no room is left for mention of those without the law—Debussy, Chopin, composers of mood music. As for Rossini, Verdi . . . One can imagine Schoenberg's expression at the mere mention of the latter. "Verdi? He wrote *tunes*! Tunes which can be played on barrel organs!"

If England could be called "Das Land ohne Musik," Germany might be called "Das Land ohne Volksmusik." The popular "folk" music of Germany is provided by some of Schubert's songs (*Der Lindenbaum* and others), Tannhäuser's invocation to the evening star, and the chorale tune in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth. Bach weaves two popular tunes of his day into the last of the *Goldberg Variations.* Both are as four-square as the hymn tunes of Luther. In the scherzo of his *Pastoral Symphony,* Beethoven pays a quizzical, amused tribute to the naïf strains of a village band. So much for *that.* Real music, with its passion and intellect, was something apart from and beyond such things.

Except for the Austrian *Ländler* (of which Schubert was so fond) and the Viennese waltz—popular items both—the German-speaking world could also be described as "Das Land ohne Tanzmusik." Only a musician with the rhythmic sensibilities of a hippopotamus—Richard Wagner—could proclaim that the rumbustious finale of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was "the apotheosis of the dance." A dance for steam engines, perhaps. No doubt it was in just such a fashion that Wagner charged about the room when he was inspired to "dance" on first hearing Liszt's piano transcription of this movement. Perhaps Diaghilev's greatest and most permanent contribution to the arts consists of the ballet music he commissioned from Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, and others. Is there even one German composer in the whole list?

So it is hardly surprising if Schoenberg, the self-appointed apostle and repository of the great, the sacred tradition, steadily ignored or dismissed Bartók, Stravinsky, and any other non-German composers among his contemporaries. Their music drew on *native* sources: worse still, Debussy adopted to his purposes some of the latest things in pop music of the day—the cakewalk, the blues—or else took up the melodic and rhythmic idioms of Spanish dance. But as a composer himself, Schoenberg was left with a capital problem: however admirable and supreme the German classical tradition might be, it had reached a point of exhaustion in Wagner, and passed beyond that into decadence in the work of Wagner's followers and in Schoenberg's own early compositions. Since there was no proceeding further in that direction, there was nothing for it, in his own case, but to ascend the mountain of the intellect and devise a completely new Table of the Laws which were to be those of a new promised land of music. Once laid down, these were to become basic and essential, a law unto his pupils, a law which the Gentiles outside the tradition of German music would ignore at their own cost.

"What is the reason for this?" was a favorite question of Schoenberg's when reading a composition by one of his pupils and finding a passage he could not approve. The student might well have countered with "What is the reason for music?" It seems to me that serialism can be seen as a strictly rationalized development from late Wagnerian chromaticism, just as Cubism is a logical working out of the principles enunciated by Cézanne and exemplified in his paintings. But even in the works of Schoenberg's most successful pupil, Alban Berg, the Wagnerian influence—in *Wozzeck,* in *Lulu*—seems to me obtrusive at times. And, in theory at least, a tone-deaf or a stone-deaf person could prove able to write twelve-tone serial music, having studied its principles and examples on paper.

The third instance in this "Mosaic" trio is perhaps the least to be expected and the most arguable. But it seems to me that the career and development of Claude Lévi-Strauss follows a similar pattern. His first book, *Tristes tropiques,* seemed to mark an

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epoch when it first appeared. It was the product of his only sustained period of direct work and study among the "primitive" races of equatorial South America. It gave a picture of the lives, characters, and customs of those peoples unlike any other in the field of anthropology. They emerge not simply as specimens and examples, but as individuals, each in his own way accepting, adapting, or even challenging the culture and tradition of which he is partaker and product. The members of these tribes are as complex, frail, unpredictable as the members of any human community, however advanced and sophisticated. They have perceptions that have atrophied in urbanized societies, societies which prove, by force of contrast, to have taboos, obsessions, compulsive habits more irrational than theirs. Above all, they have a keen tragic sense of threat or of the certainty of their own dissolution: tribes diminished to a single family, or absorbed into another tribe, with no hope of once more expanding and reviving their own particular contribution to the human spectrum. They are a world in itself which is consciously facing extinction.

Even in *Tristes tropiques,* however, a trend is evident which is to become all-invasive in much of Lévi-Strauss's later work: he makes elaborate deductions from the varying styles of facial painting practiced by the tribes under consideration, as to what they say about the individual character of the groups who invented or chose them. Are these deductions based on the author's personal assessment, on his personal experience of the tribes he lived among? Is he reading the characteristics he had already discerned into his interpretation of these facial signs? Or the reverse? In either case, a tone of "laying down the law" has crept in. These facial designs signify thus and thus, and not otherwise.

In later works, such as *La Pensée sauvage,* this tendency has become so persistent, so habitual as to invalidate the writer's insights and conclusions, at least for one reader. After the period recorded in *Tristes tropiques,* the author virtually gave up all personal, direct work and study in the field. It seems as though it was decided that such work was for laborers; it was for him to analyze their findings, correct or dismiss their interpretations, and substitute his own conclusions. But "conclusions" suggests a brevity remote indeed from the expansiveness of his interpretations. Even in the comparatively early instance of those facial decorations, he seems to me to be erecting a whole inverted pyramid of subjective interpretation on a very limited point of fact. The tendency has intensified with the years: an essay that would make a slim volume in itself is based on a single minor sonnet of Baudelaire, *Les Chats.* In another context, Lévi-Strauss has hinted at the volume of significance, ignored by mankind in general, which attaches to the simple act of *striking a match.* Well, we all know that striking a light, making a fire for warmth and illumination in the cave dwelling, and for cooking flesh, was one of the earliest acts, along with the making of tools and weapons, which distinguished man from the animal world in general. How much *can* such a fact be further elaborated?

Every point of view—all human perception—is subjective. Get a thousand people in turn to draw a chair, the same chair from the same position, and the result will be a thousand different drawings. In a few of these the subject may not even be recognizable as a chair. Such is the capacity for looking, analyzing, understanding: it varies *ad infinitum.* All writing is to a similar degree subjective. One can appreciate the subjective element, and allow for it, in *Tristes tropiques.* The writer is always distinctly there, recounting his own experience: we can accept the relativity, and the difference between the two, until the moment when the author's deductions from his own experience begin to become a superstructure of laws. But to compare the latter to an inverted pyramid, delicately poised on a very limited area of accepted fact, is of course to question the whole principle of structuralism.

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Surrealism: the anti-rational impulse of the eminently rational Frenchman to smash up the accepted surface of the meaning of life and plunge into the chaotic jungle underneath, where, as in dreams or in delirium, or in the mind when falling asleep, conventional meanings collide and coalesce with their opposites. But even this process had to be *regulated* in France, established as a system, an Order; and any accepted member of the Order who transgressed, who failed to obey the rules and principles laid down by the Order, had to be formally expelled, excommunicated!

The Gallic mind is so Cartesian, so welded to its own sense of logic that it can only view the absurd as being illogical. Thanks partly to the very nature of the language, in the English-speaking world the opposite, empirical view is a traditional habit of mind, whereby the purely logical is seen as potentially absurd—like the world of Lewis Carroll's Alice, where ridiculous behavior is regulated by a set of strict and unbreakable rules. Pure logic can only exist as speculation, on another plane from "reality."

"C'est logique" is the standard expression of a French concierge, where his opposite number in England would say "It's only common sense," meaning something very different.

Perhaps only in France could an artistic enterprise like Cubism be possible: an experiment based on working out in advance the pictorial possibilities of the principle that all solid objects can be divided or combined into three basic forms: cube, cylinder, and sphere. Such a project, however "important," was predestined to reach a dead end. There was no room in it for impulse, or for what can only be called *mood*. Which reminds me of an early poem of Yeats:

> Time drops in decay
> Like a candle burnt out,
> And the mountains and woods
> Have their day, have their day.
> What one in the rout
> Of the fire-born moods
> Has fallen away?

People never laugh at what is quite meaningless; but often enough they can be completely taken in by it, at least for some time. Hence the essential *seriousness* of every avant-garde . . .

In any art, all time and any time is the *present*. It must be—in order to be valid, to remain a part of life. A Renaissance painting of the Nativity, or of the woman taken in adultery, takes for granted that what it portrays is just taking place. The same is largely true of the Elizabethan dramatists, and even of Racine. In Racine, Phèdre, a mythological personage, Mithridate, a well-documented character of the first century B.C., and certain people of the Turkish court, who were near contemporaries of the dramatist, are all presented on the same dramatic plane, with the same degree of enhancement and removal, and in the same highly idiomatic style and language. A Rembrandt or Rubens Venus is a Dutch or Flemish bourgeoise at her toilet, or half covering herself in the newest furs. A Tintoretto Susanna is a Venetian lady bathing in her tiny garden pool—a pool would have to be tiny in a Venetian garden plot—watched by two decrepit officials who may well be members of the Grand Council. But she *is* the Susanna of the story, which is in no way falsified but simply enriched and made more immediate to the imagination.

When did the split, the division between now and then, occur? In a way, it was both gradual and intermittent. In Watteau, all his subjects inhabit the same various and continuous world. The same applies, if more loosely, to Delacroix, but not to Ingres, whose work is cleft between the miraculously cold actuality of his portraits and the always slightly ridiculous frigidity of his historical or mythical set pieces. But for nearly all eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painters, the past became a pretext for fancy costume and dramatic attitudes. In fiction . . . ? The more Flaubert struggles to make the world of *Salammbô* actually present to the eyes, nos-

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trils, and fingers, the more it becomes an archeological charade or *tour de force,* weighed down by its load of research. But it set a pattern for historical fiction, which has remained something of a research business ever since. Dostoevsky begins by setting his story forty years or so back in time, in the provincial town of X, not a hundred miles from Moscow . . . but from then on the actuality of it all is the only thing that matters. Tolstoy, having first set his great novel in the period of the Crimean War, in which he had personally served as a soldier, moved the novel sixty years back in time, but only to enlarge and intensify the picture. Nowadays, a storyteller, if he wants to set the action of his tale thirty years back, has to historicize, to work in period detail, study to avoid anachronisms.

We live in time and think of it as though it were a metaphor for place; and yet we know the parallel is false and refuses to work out. We talk of "looking forward" or "looking back" in time, or of "looking round at the contemporary scene." But what do we see when we look backward in time, as compared with what we see when we turn round and look backward in place? We see any memory we choose or, more likely, any memory that chooses us. The afternoon of the day before yesterday may be much more inaccessible to memory than a particular—but not quite *placeable*—afternoon of twenty years ago.

"Tell me the way to next week . . ." No one would ask a clairvoyant to show him how to get from London to Marseilles, but, if superstitious, someone might ask what will happen on a journey already planned in actual space and future time.

Is it possible to think of time as a one-dimensional continuum? Ever-present yet never the present for more than an infinitesimal instant?

Even Paul Valéry's paradox, "we move into the future *backwards*" (*à reculons*) is based on the established false metaphor, and simply emphasizes by reversing it. It would be as plausible to say that time advances through us, as that we advance through time.

Contemporaries unknown to each other, with the same problem and quest: Stéphane Mallarmé and Emily Dickinson, alchemists of the word, the material for their verbal alchemy being the experience of frustration, sterility, loss, absence, mourning—and a sense of the absolute haunting a very finite room.

Mnemonics: why is some bad poetry so memorable?

People who forget all the Latin they were made to learn at school still remember, years afterward, the rhyming tags in the grammar book that were designed to show and instill the uses of prepositions. No one ever quite forgets *The Raven* or *The Bells* or *The Curfew Will Not Ring Tonight,* having once read or heard them recited. Much more difficult to remember *A Nocturnal Upon Saint Lucy's Day* or *The Phoenix and the Turtle,* whatever their impact on a first reading. The latter poem, one of the greatest lyrics in the language, seems to have eluded the critics and Shakespeare scholars, as well as the anthologists, until the present century.

So far as words are concerned, there seem to be two extremes—or poles—to conscious mental activity.

At the one, words seem to be striving all the time to exist in their own right—not as abstract sound patterns but rather as rigmarole which creates its own nonsense-meaning as it propagates itself (an activity which has obviously played a part in many nursery rhymes, as well as in some great poetry). This rigmarole may consist of invented words, lists of proper nouns, tags from advertisements, a phrase overheard, another

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which has somehow come adrift from some otherwise forgotten reading, and so on; it seems to achieve change only by way of continuous self-reproduction, an activity which intensifies with physical or mental fatigue, and even accelerates toward sleep.

At the other extreme is the completely wordless mental activity, where a whole complex chain of deduction, argument, explanation can achieve itself in a few moments—though hours or days of effort might be needed in order to put it more or less accurately into words.

The two sides of the sphere:

"Pure, logical thinking can give us no knowledge whatsoever of the world of experience; all knowledge about reality begins with experience and terminates in it."

—Albert Einstein

"In a certain sense I hold it to be true that pure thought is competent to comprehend the real, as the ancients dreamed."

—Albert Einstein

The pleasures of biography: the subject's life, once it is over and the details are available, can be laid out flat like a map or a picture. To progress through it in imagination is no more than to let the eye move from one side of the canvas to the other. We can see it as a whole, with all the mountains of obstruction and crevasses of accident—which for the subject were unlooked for and incomprehensible—forming a necessary and inevitable part of the picture which he was, and could not see. But we cannot see that deeper, three-dimensional perspective which perhaps he glimpsed before he died, that one all-revealing view which is only allowed, if at all, to one viewer because he has travelled step by step and minute by minute through that line of country. Biography elides most of the immense, aching suspensions of life. We know the resolution, and once we know it the suspense becomes immaterial, terminable as soon as we move on to other considerations.

The schemes, however prolonged, which added up to nothing, amount to next to nothing in the perspective of the past. The present, which can never finally judge its own values, is a relentless winnower of the values of the past. It drags up and clears from debris the significant beginnings that were once of no significance. It quashes sensations that are no longer sensational. It ignores the moments that had to be lived through for the sake of moments; once lived, they take on a value which they could not have while they occurred.

The work, the life, the character: George Eliot would be a heavy, bluestocking bore, a sibyl of Victorian skepticism, a forgotten exemplar of female liberation; Chopin would be a dandyish invalid, a spoiled darling of select high society, and just another of Mme Sand's more durable fancies. But the vitality of their *work* puts back vitality and fascination into the detail of their lives.

Whereas Dr. Johnson . . . His career, conversation, and character have to carry much of the written work, if they do.

And Rimbaud? He gave up his work as poet because it had obviously failed to transform his life. He was young enough, and had achieved enough to feel that it should have. "I might have lived instead," remarked Yeats, looking back in old age on his career. Rimbaud tried to live instead . . .

Given a certain background, only the impossible can be desirable: Rimbaud. But his case was acutely aggravated by the precocity of genius. A child of ten or so who could turn out half a dozen Latin verse exercises for classmates was already a linguistic prodigy: he had a genius for language commensurate with the young Mozart's for music. But such a gift as his was in no way apt for display and celebrity—certainly not in those days, though an intelligent and admiring father might have done something to push

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and promote his gifts. But Rimbaud's father, an intelligent ex-military man who wrote an account of his campaign experiences in North Africa, disappeared without trace when Arthur was only six—after confiding to a friend that living with his wife was intolerable since nothing would induce her *not* to treat him like one of the children. She too had been a premature adult, orphaned as a young girl and forced to cater for and control a family of rough elder brothers. After a period of frantic, silent search for her runaway husband she finally gave up, decided to presume him dead, and donned widow's weeds accordingly. (In fact, unknown to him and his family, he was to survive the son he never again saw after the age of six.)

From the age of twelve, Arthur began to emulate his vanished father by running away, always to be picked up and brought back, or else forced back by penniless hunger. Frustration, with its bouts of fury and its attendant inertia of desperation, was to lead to the limitless ambition detailed with such cynical hyperbole in the so-called "lettre du voyant," written when he was fifteen: the poet-seer's ambition to achieve a total transformation of existence, total insight, at the very possible cost of self-destruction or madness. It was to prove more than a shade prophetic, but not in so spectacular a fashion. Life's ordinary, matter-of-fact cruelties and humiliations were to be the answer to such hubris.

The most ordinary fact was his extreme youth, coupled with his complete and helpless isolation at that age. There was no adequately kindred mind that could appreciate, oppose, criticize, no wherewithal to isolate and resist the strictly uncomprehending mother, that "maw of darkness" ("bouche d'ombre"), as he called her, who for as long as she could treated him as a child, to be stripped, whipped, and locked in his room for his unsuccessful escapes.

Later, after his much more prolonged escapade with Verlaine, Rimbaud was to repeat the pattern and come home, penniless once again—to lock himself up in a hut and sweat out the agonizing *Une Saison en enfer,* while the rest of the family was usefully employed with the harvest. Now he was a grown young man, still persisting in the folly that had ruined his mother's hopes of his making a brilliant and lucrative career (after all those school prizes!). She watched and considered. Finally she broke her silence of contempt and resentment with an astounding offer: she would pay the publishing expenses of what he was writing. Having lived through her years-long hostility to what she called "la littérature," Arthur could not but see the real force of this offer. It was a bargain, a challenge: very well, let's publish your work and see what happens. Obviously it was a bet which he had to take on.

Rimbaud went to Paris when the slim volume, *Une Saison en enfer,* came out. A young aspirant poet, Albert Poussin, who longed to frequent the literary famous, recounted later how he went to a café where they gathered. The place was crowded with chatting groups, only one figure sitting solitary and apart. Recognizing him vaguely, Poussin approached, tried to chat, offered to buy a drink, but Rimbaud remained mute, a picture of incommunicable despair. The book had passed without notice, the author's copies unacknowledged. In Paris he was known simply as the youth who had made himself so obnoxious at literary readings, and as the young man who had been the ruin of poor dear Verlaine, having been forced to stand witness at the latter's trial for that feebly melodramatic shot Verlaine had fired at him.

"My fate hangs on this book," Rimbaud had written to a friend. Having said so, he had to make it be so. He had cast his future as a writer into this one final throw and met with immediate failure. His demon of impatience could allow no thought of ultimate success. Had he collected and published his poems, the book might have met with a different reaction. But taken in isolation, what could even a well-meaning reviewer make of a work so cryptic, vehement, and devoid of any contingent matter which might explain it? We can now fit it into a whole tragic context, to which it serves as choric com-

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ment. But a stranger to all that context might well ask, as his mother had done after reading the manuscript, "What does it all mean?"

If a chronicle written in such agony was meaningless to others, what could he do but renounce it too, destroy what copies he had and every other manuscript-evidence of his "follies"? He had never been gifted with patience; what little he ever had was now exhausted. But to dismiss and demolish all his writings was to destroy a past self—a form of *living* suicide. And an essential part of that act was to cut all connection with friends who had known and shown interest in his work. Obstinate in making his own fate, he had to sever all such human ties with the past—except those with his family.

But this self-renunciation as a poet happened to coincide, identify with his mother's view of his writings. What he said of them—"all rubbish"—was what he felt she had always thought of them. The manic years of wandering that followed, before he finally made for the East, were an endless-seeming struggle to destroy his demon, be *free* of it at last. At twenty he was still young enough to feel he must be able to become a new man, strong, heroic, ruthless, and a maker of money—gold, in quantity!

The letters he wrote home from Africa make terrible reading for anyone who knows the poetry. They are the work of an *amputated* personality. They exude desperation, utter loneliness, a misery of continual boredom taking refuge in practicality and forlorn boasting, a French peasant's obsession with *gold,* and his plans for making more of it. What he had already made he wore secured in his belt, the weight of which, by his own admission, made him ill.

But the load he carried was figurative as well as physical: the obligation both to deny his past self *and* to prove the validity and strength of the new self he was struggling to forge; and the load of emotional dependence on his family as the only human tie in Europe which he had not renounced. In identifying himself with their view of his past life, he had to obey the compensatory urge to escape. But however far the tie was stretched, it could never break. His letters home are an implicit acknowledgment, almost an accusation, of his dependence and of his family's—above all of his mother's—responsibility.

From the moment of conscious revolt, at twelve, all the acts and gestures of Rimbaud's life have the rigidity and fury arising from an ineradicable sense of frustration. Precocity begat loneliness, and overpowering impatience. His acuity, as keenly critical as it was creative, assured him of the value of his *Bateau ivre* and other work, but what difference, what transformation in his life did it effect? None at all. His submissions to Banville, the accepted "great poet" of the moment, had led nowhere. *The world did not answer.* Real life remained elsewhere. Time can be enormously slow to the very young. And only one of them could have written his "lettre du voyant," that self-destructive syllabus for the true poet as the all-seer—and all-sufferer.

Rimbaud's work throughout is loaded with personal prophecy, either direct or inverse. His boast, at twenty, that he was still sane, sound, and whole in all his limbs, was to receive a terrible retort. Sick and in agony, he had to be carried on his last journey home across the desert; European medical care decreed he must have a leg amputated, in order to arrest if possible the progress of his cancer. Crippled and partially paralyzed, at thirty-six, still with his way to make and business interests to pursue, "better be dead than lame," he wrote to a colleague. But he fought for life: until the death he had invoked half a lifetime before as the "mysterious Sister of Charity" approached, his sister Isabelle, his only companion in the Marseilles hospital, had the satisfaction of converting him back to the faith in his delirious state. But his last minutes were obsessed with departure. He dictated a letter to a steamship company: if *the boat* was due to leave tomorrow, let him be carried on board at once, as he was paralyzed and could not walk. Escape must still be possible!

When Isabelle and her coffined brother arrived home after the long journey from

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Marseilles, the mother's immediate act was to order a funeral "de première classe"—the best that money could buy! And even a small French town in those days could provide an impressive show in the way of "pompes funèbres"—horses, carriages, house and church festooned with black draperies, a choir to sing requiem. But the mourners were few; the friends of former years were rigorously not invited. However monstrous all this may seem, there is nothing ridiculous or comic about it. Mme Rimbaud was a truly complex character, and her motives and satisfactions on the occasion were fully in accord with that.

Rimbaud has been a tempting subject for dramatists, but they settle for the Rimbaud-Verlaine relationship with its obvious stage rewards—the confrontations, quarrels, pursuits, the pistol shot, the wounding, the trial—all so well documented. But in the drastic and tragic agony of Rimbaud's life, the real counter-agent was his mother, an equally tragic figure in her own inscrutable fashion.

There's always a greater or lesser contrast—a contention, one might call it—between the peculiarity of a given poet's life, character, and fate, and the potential universality of his work. The poetry that Marlowe *would* have written, if he had survived that quarrel at Deptford, exists potentially in the still living language in which he wrote. But it will never exist in fact, because only he, of all individuals past and to come, could have created it. This is true of every poet and his unrealized possibilities. The poems of the mature forty-year-old Keats (given the circumstances in which he could have written them) are there, in the language, never to be realized. This may make nonsense of the idea, enlarged upon by T. S. Eliot and others, that a language can be subject to creative exhaustion. Why should a language be subject to exhaustion, if the potentialities, the permutations, and the combinations of the game of chess can go on forever? But a comparison with chess, a game where the moves have to obey a set of centuries-old, unbreakable rules which provide the endless complexity of play, may help to explain why the free, "uninhibited" forms in poetry and painting—in fact all the arts—are more exhaustible, even though less limited, than those that are bound by a set of definable rules. Is Modigliani more durable, more *various* than Pollock?

Salomé with the head of John the Baptist, Delilah cropping the hair and the strength of Samson, Judith and Holofernes, Jael-Sisera . . . The meaning of the image is obvious enough. But why should it recur as a pattern in Jewish history and mythology?

For the Greeks it was the young male hero who returned with the head of the monster—woman or dragon. The sex of dragons may be left indefinite, but there is no doubting that of the Gorgon.

David, the only Hebrew parallel, was a young boy—not yet pubescent? The text seems to imply that.

Circe-Ulysses . . . but the intention is not the same: to turn man into beast is very different from drawing off and extinguishing the beast's force. And anyhow, Ulysses is the center of a whole circle of possible male-female relationships: Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, Nausicaa, Penelope, in all of which he dominates or else escapes, excepting the last. And poets as different as Dante and Tennyson have imagined him abandoning that one too. Feminine wisdom deified—Pallas Athene—is in Ulysses's favor throughout his life.

To return for a moment to Salomé: I have thought of a fitting climax to Richard Strauss's opera of that name. In the final scene, the head which the gloating heroine carries on a tray is as realistic as possible, but made of marzipan, chocolate, and other confections. And as the orchestra launches into its massive conclusions, she begins to eat the head . . .

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The theater is a world of pretense and cannot get away from that. Comedy thrives on pretense within pretense, and so does melodrama, including the melodramatic elements in tragedy. The one unforgivable pretense is the claim, implicit or explicit, that *this is Reality, this is You.* Since long before Brecht, and more insistently since, the claim is continually being made; and the result can only be a sort of shadowboxing. After all, it was the greatest playwright who, toward the close of his career, measured his terms and said, "The best in this sort are but shadows."

Around 1860 a London theater-manager had an inspiration. Short of script material, or tired of the barnstorming melodramas that were his stock-in-trade, he invited one of his leading actors, along with his wife—also an actress—and children, to bring some of the main furnishings of their living room, with other daily essentials (pots and pans, crockery, clothes, a cot for the baby), and set up house *onstage.* Whether they had domestic pets isn't recorded. A dog or cat would be an unpredictable player. But a bird in a cage, parrot or canary, is a safe bet for those times.

So the customary public was invited to come and see Mr. So-and-So, that eminent stage artiste, and family at home onstage. The novelty proved a considerable draw. There were queues. As seasoned professionals, the actor and his wife would know how to improvise, discuss their money problems, work up a quarrel about bills or personal expenses, arrange for professional friends to call in and gossip—perhaps invite some strictly unprofessional and unfavorite relative to come on and be shown up as a stage idiot by their professional skills. And they would be carefully attuned to emergencies: a sudden outburst of tears and yells from the baby's cot offstage, or the parrot, like Pope's "Coxcomb bird, so talkative and brave,/Whoe from his cage cries Cuckold, Whore, and Knave," would suddenly convulse the audience with an outburst of screaming and swearing.

This momentous and prophetic innovation has no known place in theater annals. It would have vanished from record altogether, had it not been seen by a young French student, one Stéphane Mallarmé, at that time spending a year in London to improve and practice his English. He was of course bemused by the ambiguity—accidental or otherwise—of this apparent confrontation, this *challenge* between theatrical art and everyday reality. As a shy and rather bewildered young foreigner he may have felt that this odd experiment must in some way be typically English. And if so he could have been right. Whatever else it illustrates, this episode seems to me to be based on the unspoken Anglo-Saxon assumption, particularly powerful in bustling, ongoing mid-Victorian England, that . . . well, "Art isn't the real thing, now is it?"

Successful as it was, the enterprise must have proved more or less a once-only experiment, or more would have been heard of it. However obscurely, the audiences must have come to wonder how far the participants were *being,* as opposed to *playing,* themselves, how much of their ordinary everyday living could survive unchanged within the framework, the artificial lights, and limits of the stage. Sixty years later, the question was to have a particular fascination for Luigi Pirandello. But his obsession as a playwright with the problem of art and illusion versus reality was to involve as much ingenious contrivance, as much artifice, as a play by Sheridan or Marivaux—however different it might be in effect.

Any consideration of the illusion-reality conflict in the theater is bound to bring us on to Brecht and his "alienation effect." As his craft was wholly dedicated to the purpose of inculcation by way of entertainment, his aim had to include the lowest common denominator in his audience. There are people who long to experience the process of instruction and "enlightenment," even if they bring nothing articulate away from it—a quality which Brechtians could share with Moonies and any number of other cults of born-again insight and revelation, with their attendant disciplines.

As a preacher Brecht was inevitably anx-

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ious that his audiences should not be carried away by the action of the drama and miss out on the inculcation, the *message*. In this he overrated the force of his dramatic fictions as such, and to an even greater degree he underrated the most elementary sophistication of any possible audience in his day, since by that time the cinematograph had reached its first full development as popular dramatic entertainment.

One of the finest and most serious of Daumier's lithographs of the life of the theater gives us a view of the back stalls, where two road menders (by their looks and clothes) watch openmouthed, totally lost in what they see happening on the faraway stage, where the hero (or villain?) has seized the heroine (or villainess?) by a hank of her long black hair in one hand while he threatens her with instant death in the other—unless rescue rushes in from the wings. Daumier was illustrating something that had ceased to be possible with the advent of cinema, where the two-dimensional world of the camera achieves a conviction of reality quite beyond the physical reality of the theater. I remember I was a ten-year-old and already a seasoned filmgoer when I was taken on my first visit to the real theater. I was successfully alienated by the goings-on of the players onstage—and agog with curiosity as to what they did with themselves offstage, in the wings! I was much too young to wonder about all the contrivance, in studio or outdoors, that went into the making of a film. The resulting "reality" was enough, with no questions asked.

A friend who quite often saw the Berliner Ensemble not long after Brecht's day and in its own house, where charges were modest enough to match the aims of a people's instructional theater, was struck by the large numbers of the audience who had obviously come in for the warmth and comparative comfort they found there, and how most of them lost no time in achieving the total alienation of sleep.

The "logical development" fallacy—one thing leads to another in a cause-and-effect relationship like the chains of begats in the Bible—is ever-present in every kind of historical narration: but perhaps most of all in the history of science? It is "natural" to suppose that one scientific discovery has led to another since the beginning of time. But looked at more closely the order of discoveries may be quite haphazard, or even reversible, and the "logical" development imposed on it quite illusory. Why, for example, did Archimedes discover and announce his famous law nineteen centuries or so before Newton discovered the law of gravity, to which Archimedes's discovery is after all a mere corollary? The Syracusan physicist having gone thus far, and having arrived at an explanation of why some solids float at varying levels in a liquid and others sink through it, could surely have pressed one pace further, to answer the much more basic and more obvious problem of why all, or nearly all, objects fall through air to the ground. The Greeks, who had a genius for asking the most elementary questions, as well as for inventing the most ingenious pseudo-problems, left this question out.

A baby of one-year-old or older is fascinated and baffled, playing with his first ball or rattle, when he finds it obeying the laws of gravity. He throws it up and outward. It is his own possession, a part of his own thingness, like his hand. It will surely obey his wish and jump back to where it belongs. But no, it falls to the ground, far away out of reach of his high chair where he sits securely hemmed in. Surprise, dismay. Scream for it to come back. It won't. Try throwing out something else and see if, by some strange willfulness, that too falls to the floor, out of reach. It does! Everything does—bits of food, a cup with milk in it. In fact, testing out this perversity of things becomes a game in itself, something achieved, to be laughed at instead of cried over. But next day the phenomenon is forgotten, until it begins to happen all over again. It takes a long time, weeks, months, to learn this obstinate habit of things. And then the lesson has to be

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learned all over again with his own painful self as object, falling and being hit by the hard ground. In fact the lesson of gravity is inculcated with so many accidents and blows to the child learning to walk, it comes perforce to be accepted unquestioningly as an absolute, to be feared and obeyed with all due caution.

Did Newton, sitting in his garden and seeing the apple fall, have to reduce his perceptions to those of a two-year-old—at the age of twenty or so—to ask the question: Why?

In the train between Folkestone and Dover Priory, the line cuts along the base of the cliffs, about one hundred feet above sea level. I glanced up from reading to see clouds of white thunder rolling away and upward to the left, suddenly arrested as chalk cliffs, with darker rifts of growth and flint in them, and one or two choughs or ravens floating in and out from the overhanging fringe. The sense of vaporous movement suddenly arrested into something solid was the reverse of that glance you give sideways at smoke rising from a bonfire, when it seems stilled or frozen for a second, to be released into movement in the next second of consciousness that it *is* a vaporous smoke, not a solid. A similar sensation while looking out of the carriage window in the train to Chamonix: those jagged grey glittering edges of cloud up there are in fact frozen pinnacles of mountain, of solid earth glimpsed at a momentarily impossible height.

Reading Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle,* whatever one's geological ignorance, one finds it impossible not to share the young scientist's excitement as he works out his picture of the forces that went to form the land of South America. The process of eons, the relentless pushing up of the Cordilleras, dragging and rumpling the blanket of the neighboring plains, becomes visible to the naked eye; and one can go on to see the element of cataclysm in the apparent eventlessness of a landscape—the imminent suspense of cliffs or canyons, the continuous calamity of a waterfall.

The zoo is always new because it can always offer a fresh, unimaginable, eye-to-eye close-up. The alligator's eye: the lower lid shoots up into the horny shelf of the upper, and drops open again. The color of the iris is of pale mud behind glass, the pupil a vertical needle just touching top and bottom. The head of the horned adder: a shallow slipper with inset dusty eyes; it is all of the same sand-color, glossless, impossibly alive.

The gazelle front-face: long, narrow, with the rich eyes bulging on either side, fringed with the heavy lashes; the oddly superfluous look of the horns when it lowers its head to nose the ground, when the long hyper-sensitive ears behind the horns are fully visible.

The serpentine neck of the ostrich: piping up from the bundle of the egg-shaped, plume-draped body, with the head too suggesting a probably harmless snake. But seen full on, the fixed grin is wider than the head.

The tender, bloodshot brown eye of the rhinoceros: human, yet lost and insulated in all that area of armor-plated head.

The snowy owl, smooth as alabaster, weightlessly statuesque: the yellow, inky-lidded eyes stare through the white mask like a mummy's, suddenly lit up with otherworld life. Silently volatile and erect, the mummy shoots out a carved wing, and then another, and changes its perch. The head turning this way and that hardly disturbs the perfect oval of the silhouette. It can reverse completely, and gaze straight over its back, so that from the front it looks like the featureless, egg-faced phantom of Japanese ghost stories.

The chinchilla whirls round its cage like a glossy grey spinning top, and then comes to a quivering stance of concentrated stillness, looking at nothing, heraldic, askance, absolutely at a loss.

The flying buttress of the kangaroo's tail: its nervous, delicate, suffering face. It suffers

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from the natural deformity of its sad little front legs. Out of its inherited environment, it can't remember why it was made this way.

The Argentine wolves, amazed, endlessly revolving and following each other in an absolutely silent figure of eight: their tales are smoke; they seem on their long legs, erect and eery, to walk on smoke. In search of themselves, they look as if they wanted to be in a Perrault fairy tale. But they came into this place where there is no way out. The fact of no way out is inconceivable, they go on looking. (They didn't survive long in captivity.)

Many of the great creative influences of the past century and more have been in a sense uninventive, and the reverse of prolific. Baudelaire and Mallarmé suffered—in their own eyes—from a real penury of invention, which partly explains their cult of admiration for Poe, who, whatever his faults, was a writer of many inventions. Even at their worst his stories and poems are original. Cézanne devoted his life to analyzing what he saw in front of his eyes, and apart from one or two remarkable early essays, and a sketch for an apotheosis of Delacroix, never attempted a purely imaginative subject.

Yeats was another great uninventive writer —he had a minimum of manipulative or narrative facility. And that perhaps explains his lifelong admiration for Balzac, for instance, as well as the value he put on the work of Synge, who invented the peasant world and speech Yeats longed for. Yet Yeats carries so much more *weight* than the agile, multi-inventive Kipling.

As a storyteller, none can be more stilted, more awkward, more laborious than Melville at his worst. But in *Bartleby the Scrivener* alone he opened up a whole seam which has since been intensively worked by others—from Kafka, say, to Beckett. And nearly all the rest of Melville that matters is based on the experiences of his very few years at sea.

The terror of being alone, the compulsion to be alone, to get away from it all . . . The basic burden of Pascal seems to be that man ought always to be in fact what he always is in essence: alone in the face of immensity, of the "eternal silence" of infinite space. Yet he lived in the century when France was perfecting the idea of man as the indefatigably adjusted social animal, a member of a strictly functional community, categorically graded and interrelated, like that of an anthill: a society that was to be appropriately sanctified to history in the vast *Mémoires* of the Duc de Saint-Simon. His pages include a portrait of Pascal's opposite, the Prince de Conti, who could never bear to be alone, not even on his stool. But then, according to the same authority, the long and important session on the *chaise percée* was the ritual occasion with many eminences, military or political, for talking over the most important and confidential matters. And Saint-Simon means no irony but only climactic praise when he remarks of a certain lady that she was a Grand Duchess even on her *chaise percée.*

Almost every "serious" play now has to have a moral thesis, a message. It is difficult to see what moral thesis lies behind *The Way of the World* or *Twelfth Night,* both serious comedies, not farces. Any attempt to reduce *King Lear* to a single overall moral statement ends in nonsense or the obvious: you can't divide your property into three parts and give them away, and then pretend that you still own it. But the plot material subjected to the emotional heat of the Shakespearean crucible becomes a sublimate, an amalgam impossible to resolve back into its elements.

Ibsen of course is the grand theatrical moralizer: but in a sense the moral message in *Ghosts* is a mere pretext for the kind of terrorism which is the play's strength, and weakness. It plays too insistently on atavistic fears.

But then Ibsen wrote neither comedies nor tragedies: he wrote *drama.* A play like

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The Master Builder has all the copybook essentials of tragedy. A hero who is head-and-shoulders above his fellows and who has the one little weakness, played upon by a challenging temptress, is inevitably driven to commit hubris, and then all too literally crashes and falls. This might serve as a very brief outline of *Antony and Cleopatra*. But while in Ibsen's play the dramatic and sensational possibilities of the plot are manipulated with the greatest skill, the essential tragic catharsis is never there even for a moment.

In Ibsen's case, the moral or message adds force and seriousness to the wily manipulation of the drama. But in his less successful plays, it always looks as though the moral thesis were simply a prop to hold up a structure that would be too unwieldy or unbalanced to stand without it.

Some snatches from imaginary conversations:

"I lead such a disorderly inner life. But I wonder who doesn't."

"In my experience, youth is very largely a mistake: which doesn't explain why I would like to do it all over again."

"I ask you, what on earth would I do—or not do—without my inhibitions?"

"A wit is the kind of bore or nuisance who says what you would like to have said."

"A woman can make love without wanting to. A man can't. Who's got the advantage?"

"Some people turn their lives into a desert, for the sake of a mirage."

An El Greco *Annunciation,* seen at a show of paintings from São Paulo, seems to me to offer the perfect image of religious ecstasy streamlined: the "Oh, my dear!" expression of the Virgin, warding off the supernatural onset with a raised hand, and just not quite daring to look; the imperious downswoop of the choreographic Angel, "I have this strictly official, but quite divine message for you"; the symptomatic bunch of flowers, just about to burst into spiritual flames. With tremendous but by now too habitual legerdemain the whole idea has been slightly reformulated, sublimated with more skill than feeling, stunningly unified and fitted into the picture space.

It was El Greco who made one of the most delightful remarks on record in the history of painting. As a young man, fully assured of his gifts and finding no adequate outlet for them in his native Crete, he set off on his travels in search of patronage and place, and inevitably made for Italy—to Venice first, where he imbibed much from Titian and Tintoretto that would enter into his own style, and then on to Rome. He went of course to the Sistine Chapel. Having studied the famous ceiling for a while, he is said to have murmured, "What a pity he didn't know how to paint." It was no casual remark. El Greco acted on it and made a perfectly serious offer to paint the whole thing over again in a more appropriate style. Such an offer was not so revolutionary for those times. In the same building and only a few paces from the Sistine Chapel, a whole room of frescoes by a quaint old-fashioned painter called Piero della Francesca had been wiped out to make way for the marvels of the young Raphael.

Looking at Michelangelo's ceiling with the Greek painter's stricture in mind, one can catch a glimmer of what he meant. Michelangelo's vast creation is based on a carefully devised system, a sequence of episodes from Bible history, from creation to last judgment. It is eminently logical in its layout. But looked at as a whole, does it give an impression of overall visual unity? Eye and mind quickly give up the attempt to see it entire, and attention fastens on one tremendous individual unit or another. The parts add up to something much greater than the whole: and that is something which the dawning idea of baroque painting would have had to put right.

For El Greco a painting, however vast in size, must have an overall design in which all

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the parts had to serve the effect as a whole. El Greco, who appropriately found his niche in the land of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, was to become the painter par excellence of the Counter-Reformation, the great pictorial exponent of religious ecstasy and uplift—dazzling, spontaneous at times, but becoming obligatory and calculated at others.

From such a point of view Michelangelo's work was too literal, too biblical, too much beset with heroic images of the nude male—a minor painter was soon to be commissioned to add touches of drapery over the private parts. For all its immense size and scope, it was too personal, too eccentric, and it brazenly ignored official religious expectations. It was one man's dream, filled with his yearnings, his obsession with all he felt he could express by way of the nude torso. And it was the work of a religious mystic who studied the Bible too much, and was even suspected of being a crypto-Protestant.

In the tormented sonnet he wrote on the work's completion, enumerating the physical ills it had left him with, he foresaw a storm of criticism, but left all defense to the friend he addressed, and concluded curtly with "Painting's not my trade." It was definitely El Greco's, a trade he drove with passion, business acumen, and genius. A pity no one in Rome commissioned him to paint *another* ceiling. It would have been more "appropriate." Michelangelo's remains a great anomaly in its time and place.

Two Ways. At the heart of religion is the problem of living on a planet where organic life must feed on organic life down to the lowest, nearly indeterminable level where organic life begins. Only man among the animals developed from this a sense of guilt, a need for atonement.

The Buddhist Way: abstain from killing even the fly that walks on your face and stings. Eat life only at its humblest, least sentient level—rice, fruit, vegetable. Abstain from all else on the way to Absence, deliverance from the self-eating chain of being.

The Christian Way: the sacred cannibal feast of atonement and absolution. This is my Blood, my Flesh, drink and eat. Man incarnates the sacrificial Lamb.

The picture in the cave shaft at Lascaux is the only dramatized incident in the whole mysterious gallery: the dying bison with its entrails torn out, turns enormous eyes of reproach and forgiveness on its ritual killer. "It is a God, more than we, it gives its life for us to live on, we must worship, and eat."

The picture has been much discussed, and interpreted in a variety of ways. Is it perhaps the first surviving expression of what has been called "The tragic sense of life"?

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Poems *by Donald Petersen, Jane Kenyon, C. H. Sisson, & Norman Williams*

Unity in distress

That al is lost for lak of stedfastnesse.

This world contains such wretchedness,
  No line or fortress can withstand,
No mouth can praise nor passion bless.

Low men eat worse than dogs unless
  High are fed full. On every hand
This world contains such wretchedness.

Whole towns lie luckless like a mess
  Of fishes gasping on the sand.
No mouth can praise nor passion bless

What hands scratch blindly to express.
  Wrath rules, great nations grumble, and
This world contains such wretchedness.

Lead us all back to wilderness,
  Give us the common lot, the land
No mouth can praise nor passion bless,

And we will cry from our distress,
  Huddling like children in one band,
"This world contains such wretchedness,
No mouth can praise nor passion bless."

—Donald Petersen

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The moon man

Minding this fallen world, kicking its leaves,
Waiting for something to happen, fearing what might,
Infected with life yet having no wish to transmit it,
One walks along in the autumn, kicking dead leaves.

Torn from us, mourned for, consigned to the earth,
The long friends lie in a hard box out of sight.
Tomorrow, beached on the dark side of the moon
In a sealed can: complete mummification.
Or let the burial missile nudge past the moon,
That the dead may continue to wander.

O deep dark outer space—in you
All objects shine more beautifully than on earth.
We have sought you in pools and looking glasses,
We have called conventions in your name,
We have found you in drink.
Mad with your ether we have hit the moon.

How many years, mooning around inside me, a man
Droller than myself claims he can't act without
Further instructions. Sly, cantankerous loon—
I'm done humoring you. Out the door with you, out.

Out, at the town's end. Out. Save what you can.
Scratch in the dust with the long tines plinking,
Tinka-tink-ting, by the bonfire's towering fumes.
And rake what is foul to a pure acrid burning.

—*Donald Petersen*

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High water

Eight days of rain;
the ground refuses more.
My neighbors are morose at the village store.

I'm sick of holding still, sick of indoors,
so I walk through the heavy-headed grasses
to watch the river reach
for the bridge's wooden planks,
bending the lithe swamp maples
that grow along the banks.

Nothing but trouble comes to mind
as I lean over the rusty iron rail.
I know of plenty, in detail, that is not
my own. I nudge a pebble over the edge.
It drops with a thunk into the water—
dark, voluminous, and clear,
and moving headlong away from here.

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Alone for a week

I washed a load of clothes
and hung them out to dry.
Then I went up to town
and busied myself all day.
The sleeve of your best shirt
rose ceremonious
as I drove in; our night-
clothes twined and untwined in
a little gust of wind.

For me it was getting late;
for you, where you were, not.
The harvest moon was full
but sparse clouds made its light
not quite reliable.
The bed on your side seemed
as wide and flat as Kansas;
your pillow plump, cool,
and allegorical . . . .

—*Jane Kenyon*

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Drink, eat, sleep

I never drink from this blue tin cup
speckled with white
without thinking of stars on a clear,
cold night—of Venus blazing low
over the leafless trees; and Canis
great and small—dogs without flesh,
fur, blood or bone . . . dogs made of light,
apparitions of cold light, with black
and trackless spaces in between . . . .
The angel gave a little book
to the prophet, telling him to eat—
eat and tell of the end of time.
Strange food, infinitely strange,
but the pages were like honey
to his tongue . . . .

—*Jane Kenyon*

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The broken willow

It was an old willow with a dark
Hawthorn bush underneath its leaning stem.
(The bush was dark not because of shadow
But from the rustling silver of the willow

Poring over it like an attentive head.)
Over the stile and to the river-side
I went to examine this conjunction.
It was no girl poring over a lover

Or comforting a child dark but her own.
It was an old broken sexless thing
Which time had ripped open and its tubes
Rings and soft places open in their rot,

Yet more like a circuit than a man,
A control panel with the cover off,
Saving a natural grace, a contentment
Of ruin sinking into renewed life.

—*C. H. Sisson*

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The otter

These creatures that one does not see often:
The badger that I saw under a gate
As I leaned upon it, sudden, surprised
While the badger looked up but did not move.

Then, yesterday or the day before, that otter:
As he swam in the distance, I thought, 'a moorhen';
Then he came out of vagueness into sight,
Sinuous and sleek, swimming with all assurance,

His bright wet fur and only brighter eyes
Advancing and manoeuvering like a fleet
And so he came to land under my nose,
But I stirred once, and he was gone.

Inhabitants of the unpublicised world
Whom no word can foul, who eat and kill
According to the nature of the beast:
Give us example of discretion.

—*C. H. Sisson*

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First skaters, Perkins Pier

With thaw and cold, the early winter snow lay
In brownish patches on the fields, inspected
By the crows, and though the olive-colored water
Still mushroomed up and mottled the center
Of our lake with obscure streaks and bruises,
They came that Sunday, after early worship,
With skates across their shoulders, and, lacing up,
Debated who should be first that year to try
The ice that nudged the pier and breakwater.
Nearby, dinghies leaned against a summer stand,
And, on the point, a lighthouse stood, mute
Until the spring. At last, three boys moved off,
Their shaky weight dispatching splits and groans
That, for a moment, stilled them in their tracks.
I turned, then, back to coffee and the paper,
But, glancing up, saw to my surprise and wonder
The harbor filled an hour later with the pirouettes
Of a dozen figure skaters, with wobbling children
Bundled up to twice their size, and the slap
And dash of a pick-up hockey match. All of it,
The smallness of the figures, the galvanized,
Gray sky and snow that eddied in a devil's dance
Low across the ice, recalled that in our latitude
Miracles are not at hand, virtue lies in moderation,
And one must learn to care for ordinary things:
The tufted sparrow, washed-out moon, or unlovely child.

—*Norman Williams*

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Que Seurat Seurat

by Mimi Kramer

Some people worry less than they ought to; some worry too much and then find themselves pleasantly surprised. Some people spend all their time worrying about whether or not to worry. A small item in *The New York Times* of Tuesday, April 10, suggests that Stephen Sondheim falls into this last category of people whose ambivalence toward success keeps them from attaining it.

By success I don't mean fame and fortune: Sondheim has both already. But last July he also had a crack at producing a really first-rate piece of theater and now it seems unclear whether he will. Last summer, Playwrights Horizons (the little venue on Forty-second Street's "Theater Row" where nearly everything of interest in the New York theater seems to originate) presented a workshop production of Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park With George* that was fascinating and oddly moving—oddly because it didn't seem to be about the sort of things one usually expects to be moved by. In fact, it was about a painting—and about that only in the most cerebral and abstract sense. It wasn't that a painting figures in the plot: the painting *was* the plot. Without story line, situation, or complication, Sondheim had made the creation of a painting the primary action of his play. The entire second half had been presented in a "skeletal" version with actors wandering around holding scripts. Yet what Sondheim seemed to be doing was interesting enough to hold one's attention and true enough to leave one in tears.

One of the things that made the workshop production of *Sunday in the Park* so compelling was the fact that it was a work-in-progress *about* a work-in-progress. But the preview of the Broadway opening I rushed off to see in early April—and which left me strangely disappointed—turned out to be another work-in-progress. For the item in the *Times* announced that the opening of *Sunday in the Park* would be delayed a week to accommodate some changes and "new material" that Sondheim was adding to his new *opus*. It is hard to say, at this point, what will happen.

One thing can be counted on to remain the same: the painting. No doubt you know it: Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. (Even I knew the painting.) It's the one made up entirely of millions of little dots and little bunches of people sitting around on the grass in a park. There are several clusters in the foreground, but by far the most memorable, the largest and most distinct, is the couple at the extreme right. The man is wearing a top hat and morning coat. If you look closely, you can see that he is holding a cigar in one hand. We see less than half of him, however, as our view is almost entirely blocked by the silhouette of a woman holding a parasol and a monkey on a leash.

It is the woman that one's eye is immediately drawn to and her shape that lingers on in the mind. Her bosom rises and swells to impossible, even worrying heights; you

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might expect her to plunge forward were it not for the counterbalancing effect of an extraordinarily large bustle that seems to anchor her and hold her upright. That bustle is the most eloquent moment in the painting: it is substantially larger than any other single object in the tableau and its shape is subtly parodied, once by the particular angle at which the woman holds her umbrella and again by the arched back of the little monkey at her feet.

None of the people in the painting is talking to anyone else (except for one couple so dimly situated in the distance that they are out of earshot); this makes for a curiously silent scene and, at first, a beautifully serene and well-ordered one. Looking more closely, though, you find all manner of little oddities in the painting raising questions in your mind. That couple in the distance, for example, what *are* they doing? The woman seems to be reaching up to the man's face. Is she feeding him something, perhaps? At the exact center of the canvas another woman with a parasol is holding a little girl by the hand; the child, dressed all in white, is standing unnaturally still. That second little girl behind her, is she perhaps an expression of how the first little girl would like to be—dressed in red and running? Is *that* why the first child is grimacing, her mouth wide open in a perpetual "o"? And what about that little group on the left, the man in formal evening dress and the disreputable-looking boatman: don't they mind sitting so close to one another? Is it something happening on the river they are looking at, or is each just daydreaming?

Sunday in the Park suggests some answers to these questions. What is engaging about the production is the clever way this is done. Instead of inventing stories about the people in the painting—which would be trivializing and banal—Sondheim contents himself with conjecturing little more than who some of them are. Thus, the woman with the small monkey and the large bustle becomes Dot, the artist's model/mistress (played endearingly by Bernadette Peters) who proves, in fact, to be neither a model mistress nor a model model: "If you wish to be a good model," George instructs her, "you must learn to concentrate!" The man who stands beside Dot in the painting turns out to be someone she hardly knows and does not like in any case: Jules, a famous artist who disapproves of George's work. The woman and the very uncomfortable-looking little girl standing stiffly in the sun are Jules's bitchy wife Yvonne and his daughter; the two people sitting by the boatman in the foreground are Jules's German cook and coachman. The crabbed, bent figure who sits despondently beneath the tree beside the river turns out to be the artist's crotchety old mother and the person with her—the one in the uncanny costume—her geriatric nurse.

Since most of the characters figure in the hero's life by virtue of the fact that they figure in his painting, there is little opportunity for drama. The major "plot" of the play—the energy driving it forward—is our desire to see the final tableau assembled and to find out why each character winds up represented in the particular aspect in which he or she has been captured by the artist for eternity. If, for instance, Jules's form is almost totally obscured by Dot's, so that all we can see of him are his nose, his hat, his cigar, and his paunch, this may be George's quiet revenge for all his colleague's derision. And if some of the poses in the painting seem staged or lifeless, this may be because many of the characters are secretly posing for George, hoping to be drawn or painted by the strange young man who comes to the park to work every Sunday, the day when ordinary, respectable people take their rest.

The idea of Sunday seems to be central to Sondheim's view of the creation of the painting. The first act takes place entirely on Sunday: not one Sunday, but a series of Sundays over a period from 1884 to 1886 (the time during which the real-life Seurat was working on *La Grande Jatte*). For most of the characters in the play Sunday is the day off, a time for *seeming* to be doing something rather than actually doing it. Sometimes *doing something* can look an awful lot like *doing nothing*: George, trying to teach

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Dot the profession of modeling, tries to impress on her the degree of concentration involved in "the art of being still." But the only person to engage successfully in any productive activity is George himself, sitting off to one side and quietly sketching the spectacle of the bourgeoisie taking their dignity into the open,

> Strolling through the trees
> Of a small suburban park
> On an island in the river
> On an ordinary Sunday . . . .

For George's mother Sunday, which "is disappearing all the time," is a remnant of a more gracious and sedate past, a time "when things were beautiful"; for her nurse, "Sunday with someone's dotty mother is better than Sunday with your own." Only for George, to whom one day is much like another, is Sunday indistinctive.

The action—which is nothing more than a series of vignettes set to music—alternates between the park on the island of La Grande Jatte itself and George's studio. But wherever we are, the painting—or the idea of the painting—is always present. When we are in the park with George we see bits of the tableau coming together as pasteboard boats and trees appear and disappear according to what George is doing in his sketch pad and as characters (consciously or unconsciously) arrange themselves into patterns of inspiration for him. When we remove to George's studio we see the image of the painting cast backward on a scrim behind which we can also see him working. The backward painting is one of the cleverest notions in a cleverly staged production, for what Sondheim really offers us in *Sunday in the Park With George* is a backward view of the creation of the painting, a sort of through-the-looking-glass glimpse behind the canvas at how the hero's idiosyncratic vision transforms reality into this strange, silent scene.

If the world of George's painting is beautifully serene, the world of his Sundays is not. The boatman's perfect profile, when brought to life in three dimensions, proves to be disfigured by a large black patch covering one eye. Here Sondheim is having his little joke, of course—the boatman, monocular in the painting because he is in profile, becomes literally one-eyed in the play—but again a metaphor is at work: turn around a boatman, says Sondheim, and you get an ugly eyepatch; turn around a bustle and you get a baby. Throughout the play Sondheim's technique is to turn around the figures in the picture, showing us their obverse sides so that the curious details become small glimpses of the disarray that lies behind the well-ordered and harmonious scene. Turn the canvas around and we find the famous artist romancing his cook in the tall grasses. Turn the canvas around and the coachman has his eye on the nurse; the dignified young ladies fishing become a pair of silly shopgirls squabbling over a soldier; and the model child becomes a rambunctious little hoyden, the sort of brat that everyone would like to kill. The wife of the famous artist—for all her contempt for George's work—envies Dot when the painting is turned around: at least someone wants to paint Dot. Meanwhile, Dot herself thinks there are better things to be doing than "Staring at the river . . . on a Sunday," and wishes that George, when he looks at her, would occasionally see her.

For most of the first act, Sondheim's lyrics serve to dismantle the apparatus of the painting, playing conflict against conflict until the elements of the picture degenerate into a squabbling confusion. Then, two minutes before the act's end, having wrought chaos out of order, Sondheim brings order back again. As the verbal and musical themes of the first act come together in the first-act finale, George goes about the stage leading the familiar figures now here, now there, arranging and re-arranging them to a heartbreakingly beautiful tune reminiscent of almost everything we have heard up to now. Sitting on the edge of your seat, you experience exactly the sort of tension and suspense that musical comedy usually produces over the issue of whether everything will come out as it should. "Oh God," you

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think, "there's meant to be a parasol there! Will they get it all right?" And, of course, they do. It is all like a cross between a live jigsaw puzzle and an extremely recherché joke on the relationship between life and art.

If this sounds a bit abstract, a bit austere even, that shouldn't really surprise us. For over twenty years Sondheim has acted as a sort of point man in the avant-garde of American musical theater. Opting for the unconventional in America's most stolidly conventional theatrical medium, he delights in depriving musical comedy of its three most basic elements: catchy tunes, likable characters, and a sustained piece of action in whose outcome the audience can become interested. Sondheim's musicals ask us to care about the fate of an idea: friendship, for instance, or marriage. To be sure, abstract values are nothing new to the musical, but according to the traditional wisdom their place is firmly in the background. Sondheim tends to take an abstract concept out of the shadows, bringing it downstage to become the real hero of the piece. As for the nominal heroes of Sondheim's work, they are a curiously unlovely and unlovable crew. The archetypal Sondheim hero is a social misfit; and whether his problem manifests itself in chronic celibacy *(Company)* or chronic murder *(Sweeny Todd),* his salient characteristic seems to be an inability to relate to other people. Even the sparkling couples in *A Little Night Music*—Sondheim's most optimistic and least anti-social musical to date—seemed drawn to one another out of a shared sense of charming vacuousness and désespoir.

As Broadway's point man, Sondheim has fallen under fire roughly as many times as he has come through unscathed. Even his critical successes have rarely been financial ones —a circumstance which seems to derive, more than anything else, from Sondheim's consistent refusal to provide his audiences with a melody they can remember. Sondheim's whole stance toward commercial success seems antagonistic—or ambivalent; when all America was singing "Send in the Clowns," its author had nothing but bad things to say about the song and nothing but weary contempt for so musically unsophisticated a public. According to his detractors, Sondheim's music is too unpopular to be good; according to his advocates—and Sondheim himself—it is too good to be popular.

The hero of *Sunday in the Park With George* is another point man—in two senses: Georges Seurat is a pointillist, of course, and, like Sondheim, an artist whose work is looked on by everyone around him with mild disapproval bordering on hostility. Socially, George's pointillism is his greatest liability, or perhaps it is his single-mindedness about it that poses the problem: even his girlfriend's name is "Dot." When George opens his mouth to sing there is a good chance that what will come out will be syllables like, "Dot, dot, dot; dab, dab, dab; dot, dot, dot," keeping time with his brushstrokes. In the course of the evening he will murmur strange abstractions at us ("Order. Design. Tension. Balance. Harmony."), lose his girl, finish his painting, and—like other Sondheim heroes before him—systematically fail to make real contact with everyone around him. "Connect, George, connect," will be his girlfriend's last derisive message to him. "Connect the dots," says George.

Faulted for its execution and its subject matter, George's work is under constant fire from the characters in the painting. "Why does he paint them?" asks the rival artist. "No focus, no function, no life!" And his wife Yvonne sneers, "No life in his art" and laughs. The only person who does seem to appreciate George's work is his girlfriend; but when she leaves him for Louis the Baker, some question arises as to whether Dot simply loves the art of the man she's with when she's not with the man whose art she loves: "Louis bakes from the heart,/Louis's cakes are an art:/Louis is an artist." Throughout, George meets the indifference of his acquaintances with equanimity. When challenged by his colleague, "Why keep changing?" George replies, in a manner that

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smacks a little of Sondheim: "I don't paint for your approval."

Can the value of a work of art be assessed according to the degree to which it is misunderstood? To judge from Sondheim's own experience we might expect his answer to be yes. And, in fact, it is. If the first act of *Sunday in the Park With George* drew an analogy between Georges Seurat and the contemporary avant-garde artist, the second act makes the connection explicit.

We begin with the tableau; but now a hundred years have passed and the characters from Act I have become fading figures on the wall of an American museum. At the end of the first number George comes out, dressed as of old, and addresses the audience. "I can see them all on a sunny Sunday in the park . . . ." One of the things that has made George so likable (in addition to Mandy Patinkin's marvelous performance) is that, unlike earlier Sondheim heroes, he has almost never shared his feelings with us. Our view of George has been almost entirely gleaned from the comments and observations of those around him. He sings only about his work and, sometimes, humorously enters the minds of the figures he is drawing, telling us his imaginings about *their* feelings but rarely about his own. Consequently, our picture of George—like the painting itself—is made up of tiny little splashes of information, blended by what we bring to it from the mind's eye. Now, for the first time, we see George from the inside. For the first time we get a sense from what he tells us—a story about lying in his bed as a child and watching the light and shadows play against the wall of his room—of how much he enjoyed his life and work. "Could sleep surpass the off-and-running? No."

James Lapine's otherwise plodding and superfluous book is perhaps at its best here, at the beginning of Act II. Once Seurat has left the stage, we learn of his early death at the age of thirty-one. "I hardly knew the man," a soldier begins, and one by one the figures in the painting step forward and deliver their observations on the strange young man who spent so much of his time observing them. "They wanted him and hated him, too," explains the soldier. "They wanted to be painted and they hated him because they knew he'd always be around."

George isn't around anymore in Act II. A hundred years have passed; it is 1984, and already, as the characters from Act I take their places on the wall of the museum, we begin to miss him. What we have instead is an American descendant who looks a lot like Mandy Patinkin without a beard—which, in fact, he is. The second George (for that is his name) is also an artist; but a lot has happened in a hundred years. The world has changed and art with it. The new George wears baggy trousers, kid shoes, and a flashy red-and-white silk shirt with writing on the back; he produces something called "Chromolumes," great multi-media extravaganzas involving laser beams and huge, modular machines that are strongly reminiscent of some of the minor characters in *Star Wars*.

The second sequence in Act II favors us with one of George's *opera*, a presentation at the museum where *La Grande Jatte* is housed. The presentation is sort of laserium-show *cum* art-history lesson. George himself and his grandmother (played by Bernadette Peters from a wheelchair in a delightful parody of senility) tell the story of Seurat's life and work to the accompaniment of the weird strains of avant-garde music and surrounded by billows of smoke that pour out of the strange, space-age machine. At the high point of this sequence the instrument blows a fuse. While his engineers go to work to repair the trouble, George sheepishly steps forward and explains to the audience, "No electricity, no art." The suggestion of satire is there certainly, but ultimately it does not come through; for as silly as the spectacle of George's "Chromolumes" are, we are meant to take them seriously. Which is odd, because the third sequence in Act II invites us to the museum reception after the show and there we get a picture of the process of creation in the contemporary art scene. The comparison with what we remember from Act I is invidious at best. We are

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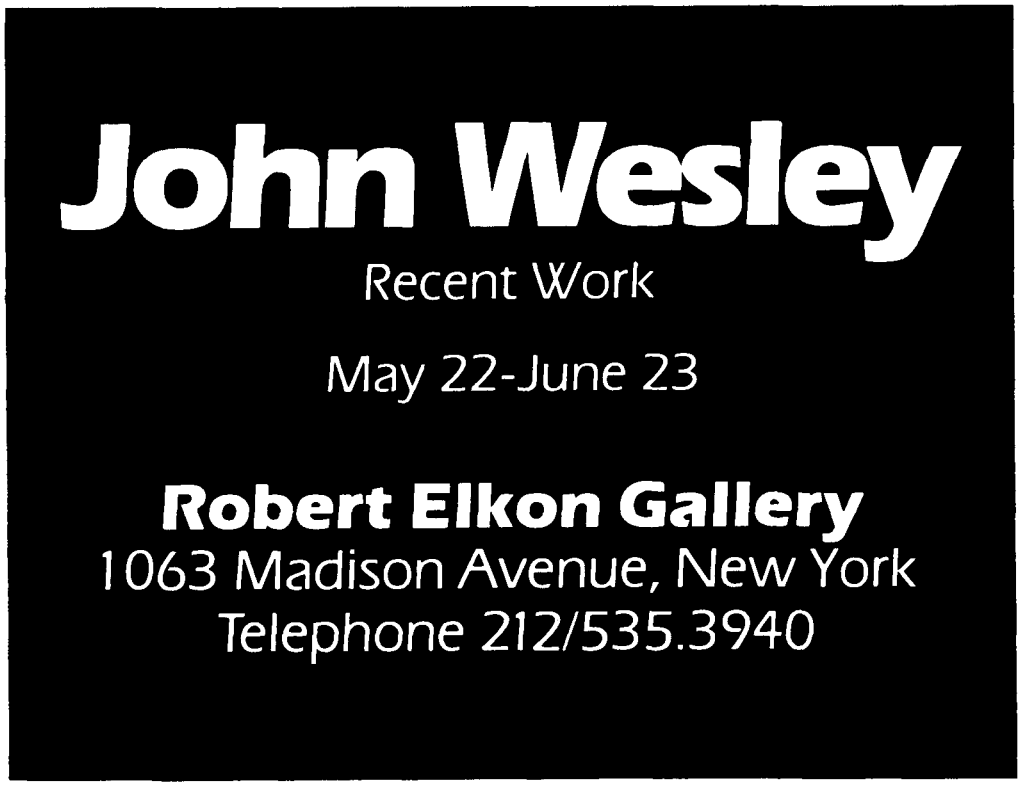

introduced to all the personages who make up that scene: its protegés, its groupies, its collectors, its critics, and its foundation representatives. Going about the room and trying to "mingle," George alternates between chatting people up and sharing with the audience in confessional asides the tribulations of the young artist in the modern world. "Art isn't easy," sings George, and all the while what he is telling us is that the life of the artist is rough because "Chromolumes" are expensive to build and you have to attend these gruesome parties and talk to these hideous people who don't really understand what you're doing anyway and "tomorrow" you may be "yesterday's sensation" because fashion changes so quickly, and on the whole: "Art isn't easy."

The problem for the audience is that certain verbal and visual themes set out in the first act come back to haunt us, making it difficult to sympathize with this fellow who takes himself so seriously. Essentially what George seems to be telling us is that his "art" consists of trying to make connections in the art world. But there is a verbal irony here, for "connections" were exactly what the hero of the first act was incapable of making, devoted as he was to his work. But dealing with people seems to be all that art consists of now, a point that is driven home visually as George goes about the party erecting pasteboard photographic images of himself in various sociable poses in order to be able to step forward and address the audience. It is as though this false sociability has become the modern counterpart to the pasteboard trees and boats and animals that constituted the work of the George we remember from Act I.

Even if Sondheim's irony is intentional, his comment on "the state of the art" is unclear, for the final sequence in Act II takes us back to the island of La Grande Jatte itself where, a hundred years after the painting, George has a ghostly spiritual encounter with Dot, who sings a sort of Rodgers-and-Hammerstein-type advice-and-encouragement number. Only instead of telling George to climb every mountain or hold his

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head up high when he finds himself walking through a storm, she advises him to carry on with what he is doing, to follow his "vision" without worrying too much about the art-world. To the avant-garde artist the message of the piece seems to be, "Keep up the good work; you're doing fine, kid!" And to the rest of us the message seems to be something along the lines of "Let's give the avant-garde artist an even break."

This is a disappointment, on the whole; for the message of *Sunday in the Park With George* was not always so predictable. In its present form, the second act of *Sunday* invites our sympathy for the figure of the point man. Originally, however, it seemed dedicated, largely, to sending him up.

The first act of *Sunday in the Park With George* has not substantially changed since last July; but the second act has. The hero of Act II of the workshop production was a fraud, a sort of twentieth-century version of W. S. Gilbert's poet Bunthorn, freely confessing to the audience that his "art" is a sham. Where the present George sings a serious song about his work called "Putting It Together," the earlier version of the same song would probably have been called "Gotta Keep Them Humming": "You know now you're a fraud/So smile while they applaud./Have to keep it coming, just to keep it going./Gotta keep them humming."

Much of the second act of *Sunday* I originally saw was in fact a satire on the contemporary avant-garde art scene; and the satire, while not unduly harsh, was terribly, terribly funny. We were meant to laugh at George's "performance art piece," meant to laugh at the pseudo-poetry he crooned into a microphone, grimacing like a rock-star:

> There are sails, sails, sails
> There is dew on the grass
> There is summer on the dew . . .

We were meant to laugh at the whole spectacle of the art world doing its thing, generating its self-perpetuating hype: the artists, the patrons, the scholars, even the flashy young critic in her mini-skirt and dramatically textured tights were meant to be funny. "Isn't it a little presumptuous to take a great work of art as inspiration?" she drawled, tossing her disco-bag over her shoulder. "I don't want to pick a fight; I'm just playing Devil's Advocate." But a muttered word from the smiling artist—something about a critical introduction to his work that *somebody* had to write—left her preening herself: "Well, I *do* know this painting *so well!*" On Broadway the flashy young critic has become a middle-aged pundit, frumpy, dumpy, and wise; and the mechanical and electronic aspects of George's creations, rather than being laughable, are presented as a serious modern counterpart to the scientific theories that informed Seurat's work in Act I.

My preference for the earlier version of *Sunday in the Park With George* has to do with the way it seemed to serve the themes in Sondheim's play. It was one of the virtues of the workshop production that it presented a picture of the point man that was complex rather than predictable. The two Georges were obviously in conflict, and satire helped us to measure their differences and note the implications. But our feelings were also complicated by the nostalgia that comes over the play toward its end.

In one of *Sunday*'s final scenes, the young George makes a pilgrimage to Paris and the scene of the painting. He is driven to the site by something he finds missing from the easy triumph of his success and by a desire to look for whatever it was that his famous forebear knew or saw in the little park on the island in the river. Condominiums now stand on the island, and as we watch the second George thoughtfully survey what is left of the little park, a familiar figure in a memorable bustle appears and approaches him. Dot addresses him as though he were her lover of old and there is a sentimental reconciliation bridging the hundred years that separate them as, one by one, the other figures in the painting join them. The first act finale had been stirring, but it is difficult to express how moving I found the scene in the workshop production of *Sunday in the Park.*

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From *Bali Ha'i* to *Camelot* the musical comedy coastline is dotted with ghostly never-never lands where heroes and heroines meet the shades of hopes they never fostered and dreams they have lost. What invested the final moments of *Sunday* with such power in the workshop version was the fact that the nostalgia had a point. The tableau was something more than just a familiar painting: it stood for all those elegantly languid Sundays and the world of charming pretense that George's mother had feared was "disappearing all the time." What made you rather sad was not that she had been right but that she had turned out to be wrong: instead of disappearing, a hundred years later Sunday—the idea of doing nothing with fashionable grace—had taken over completely to the point where art itself had become a form of civilized inaction, a stylish hoax. There was something terribly poignant about the contemporary point man's confrontation with this fact. One had the sense that the young George, gazing on the newly assembled tableau, had assimilated some truth about what he—and the world—had become.

The Broadway version of Sunday, with its "new, improved" second act, did not leave me cold, but then I'm a soft touch. Without the satire, without the element of George's self-knowledge, his final vision seemed unearned, the past seemed misappropriated, the nostalgia seemed sentimental. The complex themes that had promised so much in the earlier version seemed to have dwindled to a non-point, or to a point too easily made to warrant asking an audience to sit through what is certainly a demanding evening in the theater.

Leaving the Booth Theater a little depressed, I had the thought that if life were one of those MGM movie musicals I would rush backstage, pull Stephen Sondheim out of whatever corner he was lurking in, shake him by the shoulders, and say, "Take my advice: dig out the old script, trim the bad songs, and move to an off-Broadway theater." Like Donald O'Connor in *Singin' in the Rain,* I would tear a calendar off the wall and shove it under his nose: "Look, you've got three weeks, a great cast, and some wonderful material. Now whip this thing into shape!" But the fantasy trailed off. Everyone knows that Stephen Sondheim doesn't give a hoot what anyone thinks. On the other hand, there *was* that small item in the *Times* in April, so perhaps though I went right on walking, coming out of the Booth Theater that night, somebody else went back.

A note from the publisher

The New Criterion was founded to provide the world of ideas and the arts with sorely needed independent criticism. Among the areas in which we have attempted to fulfill this function has been the New York theater. We have published articles on this subject—all of them by our theater critic, Mimi Kramer—in twelve of our nineteen issues to date; since September of 1983 she has written for us on the theater every month. Now the League of New York Theaters and Producers has responded to this critical effort by banning our theater critic from its "Third Night Press List."

Among other things, the League of New York Theaters and Producers acts as broker between Broadway theaters and the many critics who wish to write about their productions. Every July the League reviews the claims of various publications for their critics and then issues a series of "press lists," which the theaters use to separate deserving critics from undeserving. Since last July, Mimi Kramer has been included on the Third Night Press List, which entitled her to request tickets for the third night of a large number of Broadway and off-Broadway productions. The League also provides—to deserving critics, of course—an indispensable list of openings each month.

The trouble began in January, when Maria Pucci, a press agent for the production of *And a Nightingale Sang,* then being shown at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse

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Theater, castigated Mimi Kramer for her refusal to guarantee a review of this production even though she had received complimentary tickets to it. Maria Pucci then told our critic that her name would be removed from the Third Night Press List.

On February 13, Mimi Kramer received a letter from Harvey Sabinson, the League's executive director, informing her that her name was being removed from the list. The reason? "[T]he Press Lists Committee . . . felt that the coverage accorded the Broadway theater by you was too sporadic for inclusion."

On February 17, our managing editor, Erich Eichman, wrote a letter about the matter to Richard Barr, the League's president. As Mr. Barr has never honored us with the courtesy of a reply, I called Mr. Sabinson on March 28 to discuss the matter further. Though he stressed that the decision to remove Mimi Kramer's name had been made, not by him, but by a committee of Broadway publicists, he did offer his "personal" opinion that the conclusion to her review of *La Cage aux folles* ("Without Feathers," December 1983)—a production Miss Kramer saw, by the way, not on a press ticket but on a ticket purchased at the box office—was "infuriating."[1] After I stressed that because our coverage was not only regular and extensive, it was plain that it was indeed Mimi Kramer's opinions which were the *casus belli,* Mr. Sabinson added another "personal" opinion: "Anyone who denigrates our business," he said, "I find appalling and rude."

I pointed out to Mr. Sabinson that he was attempting to influence press coverage by withholding tickets. He ended by assuring me that although Mimi Kramer had been removed from the list, she was still free to request tickets from the publicists for each production. I might add that since my conversation with Mr. Sabinson, Mimi Kramer has made several such attempts, and they have all been unsuccessful. Clearly, Mimi Kramer seems to have been black-listed.

Though Mr. Sabinson never said, "We don't like what Mimi Kramer writes about the theater and so we're taking her tickets away," it is hard to reach any other conclusion. The real issue is that Mimi Kramer has cast a cold eye on the Broadway theater, and Broadway publicists apparently exist to secure, by any means at their disposal, an unstinting, unreflecting, and uncritical flow of praise. Clearly, for Mr. Sabinson and the publicists he represents, anyone who writes a critical review "denigrates [their] business." Thus, it seems that press tickets are granted not as a courtesy to independent critics but as a reward for proper attitudes.

The New Criterion will not be a party to such transactions. We will buy our tickets as necessary, and we will certainly maintain our coverage of the Broadway theater. Our magazine was founded to provide independent criticism, and despite the best efforts of Broadway press agents, we shall continue to do so. —*Samuel Lipman*

1 For the convenience of the reader, here, reprinted from her review, is Mimi Kramer's conclusion: "If *La Cage aux folles* was going to cast off its drama, it might have kept its gaiety. But the gaiety is gone, *disparu*. Had it not been for the first-half closer, this need not have been much more than a shame. Jerry Herman's lyrics, however, made it rather hard to take. George Hearn's impassioned rendition of the song 'I Am What I am,' in view of the style of the production, brought on an almost physical revulsion. 'Your life is a sham,' sang George Hearn, his blood vessels bulging with righteous indignation, 'Till you can shout out, "Hey world! I am what I am!"' Oh how I wanted to shout something back. But my mind reeled before the task of answering so brazen a display of cowardice. So when George Hearn made his dramatic exit up the aisle I followed him: up the aisle, out of the theater, through the lobby and into the street with the audience's tumultuous ovation ringing in my ears. What I was escaping, more than anything else, was an odor of sanctity; I might have expected it in a church service, but it had nothing to do with a slightly risqué musical comedy. Plunging out into the squalid lights of Broadway I felt an overpowering desire to do something really naughty. So I took my ticket stub, offered it to the grimiest, most unsavory hoodlum loitering under the marquee, forcibly propelled him toward the theater, and disappeared into the wicked night."

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On June 29, *The New Criterion* will publish an extra edition of the magazine, entirely devoted to the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art. Written by Hilton Kramer, *The New Criterion*'s editor, the issue will provide extensive coverage and historical analysis of this important event. The text will be accompanied by carefully selected and necessary illustrations documenting the Museum's present role on the American and world art scene.

This exciting example of *The New Criterion*'s coverage of the visual arts will be sent without charge to the magazine's subscribers. It will also be available on newsstands and in museum bookstores across the United States. The single copy price will be $3.50.

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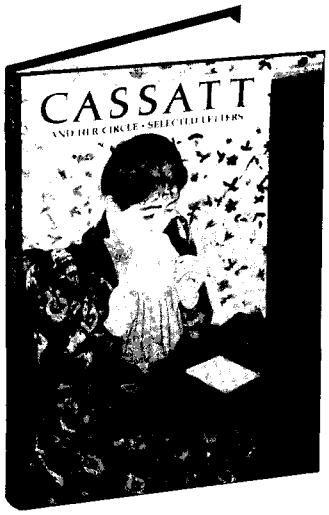

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Art

The "triumph" of Mark Tansey

by Eric Gibson

Some exhibitions have a double existence. Besides revealing the art and the artist, they shed light on other matters, thus acquiring an importance beyond the normal run of "new work." Such an exhibition was Mark Tansey's at the Grace Borgenicht Gallery in March.

All nine paintings and all of the drawings in the exhibition were sold early on—hardly a surprise given the enormously favorable response that greeted Tansey's first solo show only eighteen months ago. Clearly, the desire for his work continues unabated, and it would be unfair to deny him full credit for this. Yet there is something else, something *outside* these paintings, that accounts for their appeal. Just what is this, and how does it explain their success?

Tansey's new paintings were similar to the previous crop. Executed in a meticulous, photographic manner, they depict imaginary incidents that comment in a lighthearted way on issues and events in postwar American art. *Triumph of the New York School* refers in its title to *The Triumph of American Painting,* Irving Sandler's 1970 history of Abstract Expressionism. And indeed the painting itself is a tongue-in-cheek illustration of the outcome implicit in Sandler's title: the transfer of artistic power from Paris to New York effected by the artists of the Abstract Expressionist school. On a smoking battlefield, a smiling Clement Greenberg takes the surrender from a representative of the French forces as Harold Rosenberg, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell look on. Matisse and Picasso stand somberly alongside their defeated French compatriots.

In a second work, a group of painters records the launching of the space shuttle. Its title, *Action Painting II*, is a reference to the late Harold Rosenberg's 1952 characterization of the method of Abstract Expressionism. In *Action Painting I,* exhibited in Tansey's first show, a woman carefully depicts—easel before her, palette in hand—the climactic moment of a speedway auto wreck, an image calculated to recall the death in an auto accident of action painting's pioneer, Jackson Pollock.

Occasionally, Tansey will delve into the arcana of modernist aesthetics. Clement Greenberg's writings on the end of easel painting and of illusionistic space are the subject of *Death of Painting.* Here, painted on an actual movie screen, a cowboy shoots his mirror reflection. In *Myth of Depth,* Jackson Pollock walks on water, near a boat containing Clement Greenberg. This painting contains a double reference: to Pollock's exalted reputation, and to the spatial complexities of his paintings. Pollock, looking at the water, sees the same play between surface and depth as we see in his paintings.

Tansey's paintings, then, are predicated on a double take: first we look at them, then at their titles, and then we laugh or step back to unravel the conundrum. To do either, however, we must first understand the refer-

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ences they make to the art world of the Fifties, and, at times, of our own day. Without this understanding, they amount to deftly executed oddities, that is all. It is hard to imagine what someone ignorant of the recent history of modern art would make of the sight of Picasso standing in the midst of a battlefield. And from *Death of Painting* they might conclude that people were too busy going to movies and watching television to pay attention to art anymore. Indeed, any number of interpretations could be drawn from these paintings in the absence of a specific body of information. In that event their point—which amounts to a parody of the philosophical complexity, the seriousness, and the expansive claims of the art of the Fifties and, to an extent, of our own day—would be entirely lost. These are paintings that address themselves solely to the knowledgable gallery-going public.

But for Tansey to make this point, a certain distancing is required. This allows the artist to isolate those references he wishes us to acknowledge without risking their contamination by others. Thus the contrived, archaizing situations, the meticulous, photographic execution, the monochromatic, old-photo color scheme all combine to remove these paintings from any normal condition of realism. Instead, as in the theater, where stage, sets, and proscenium arch clearly set off the action from the audience, Tansey's devices construct an artificial space, a distance, giving his subjects room to resonate.

To take but one example: *Occupation* depicts a group of Prussian soldiers gathered at the corner of Spring Street and West Broadway in contemporary Soho, a reference to the recent "invasion" by Neo-Expressionist German painting into what had formerly been the exclusive province of American art. ("Der Triumph der Berliner Schule"?) Had Tansey chosen *Wehrmacht* uniforms instead of the greatcoats and spiked helmets depicted here, the picture would have taken on an unpleasant edge. Ironic commentary would have taken a backseat to a direct linking of Kiefer, Baselitz, and the like with that tragic period in their country's history, a period Kiefer, for one, is deeply concerned to overcome. With memories of World War I sufficiently distant, however, Tansey can count on our seeing such period accoutrements as quaint, and therefore innocent of any untoward association. This helps us to read the picture as he intended, as a wry comment on the ascendance of this new German art in the galleries and drawing rooms of Manhattan. And it assures the proper handling—and reception—of their subjects.

There is to these subjects a distinctly retrospective character. Virtually all belong to a period that, however alive in our memories and fondly recalled, is now part of the history books. This is of course the period of the late Forties and Fifties, when Abstract Expressionism was receiving widespread recognition and acclaim, and when the artistic initiative had shifted, as Tansey shows us, from Paris to New York.

It is worth noting that Tansey, born in 1949, had just received his BFA at the time Irving Sandler's book on Abstract Expressionism was published, placing him a generation behind the principal figures of the period. The ironic detachment central to his work was thus in a certain sense given. The people and events described in that book would easily have had—as the anecdotes of one's elders often do—an unreal, attenuated relationship to his present. This attenuation is precisely the feeling Tansey evokes in his sepia-toned, monochromatic images.

But more is involved in Tansey's work than just a difference in generations, for he also includes the new Neo-Expressionism among his subjects. This suggests that, for Tansey, everything from the Fifties right up to his immediate predecessors falls under the heading of the historical past.

What these paintings really reflect is a shift in sensibility. They chart a passage from a time—particularly the Fifties—of unprecedented physical and spiritual involvement in the making of art, when the individual, the work, and the act formed an unbreakable unity, to a time—our own—when

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irony and self-conscious detachment is all but *de rigueur*. Tansey's paintings, more almost than all the writing that has addressed itself to the issue of postmodernism, tell us that something has come to an end in the way art is conceived, executed, and considered.

Leaving aside for the moment Ad Reinhardt's cartoons, one can hardly imagine, during the Fifties and Sixties—at the height of the debates in the pages of *Art News, Art in America,* and *Artforum*—anyone making satirical comments such as Tansey's, or for that matter anyone wanting to. Yet this is just what we have here: Tansey is sending up the issues—flatness, representation, space, method, subject—that informed the debates and the art-making of that time, as well as the high seriousness attached to them.

Take *Action Painting II* again. Here the intention is to parody through opposites. A group of (Sunday?) painters stand at their easels meticulously copying a launching of the space shuttle. The shuttle is an image taken from nature and, by virtue of its motion, it stretches the limits of their method, to say the least. This of course is anything but the intuitive, inward-looking method of Abstract Expressionism, or "action painting."

And here, I think, is the crux of the change this art represents. For whatever one may think of Rosenberg's celebrated characterization, and whatever it has come to mean with the passage of time, it stood when it was uttered for an entire aesthetic, even for a mode of being. The fact that we can chuckle at this concept now, and indeed that we can see such a parody of artistic seriousness enshrined in a museum, as *Action Painting I* was in the last Whitney Biennial, tells us more clearly than anything else that a new period of artistic endeavor has arrived, one that has sought to legitimize itself, like others before it, by discrediting its predecessors. And this, I think, is the one true pity of the pictures, the one sour note that is sounded. For it does no honor to the painters who gave so much of themselves to their art at a time when it was all very much of an

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uphill struggle. One may disagree and criticize, but it is invidious to parody.

This, I think explains Tansey's extraordinary success. He has struck a vein of ennui among the art public for what it sees as the extreme, almost mystical tones and the obscurantism of the debates that surrounded the art of the Fifties and Sixties. And this weariness expresses itself in a desire for a more accessible, even facile art, art of the kind we are now seeing.

Tansey's own work is very much of this accessible character. To be sure, one must, as I say, have a certain body of knowledge in order to understand it. But if market demand is any guide, most people have this already, and for those who don't, it is easy enough to come by. (If you don't want to read, just eavesdrop around the gallery.)

Once so equipped, it takes no time at all to unlock the mysteries of Tansey's paintings, and once that is done they become open to everyone. They partake of a near-universal language, having about them a transparency, an easy accessibility that is anything but the case in the art of the preceding decades. Try to imagine the public responding to the work of Barnett Newman, Arakawa, Twombly, or almost any other artist of that period as they do to Tansey's paintings and the point will become clear.

Tansey, then, has made it plain through his work that a shift in sensibility has now taken place, a shift of which this work, of course, is a part. For those very devices he employs to achieve his effects, reshuffled, form the working vocabulary of what we now refer to as postmodernism: the drawing of inconographic source material from popular magazines; the adoption and comingling of older styles; an element of mannerism; the self-abnegation of the artist; and of course, the prevailing attitude of irony. The only thing omitted is deliberate disjunction, of the sort found in the paintings of David Salle, as well as in so much of the new architecture. But in Tansey the constraints of coherence forced unity upon him.

I may be wrong, but I suspect the life of this sort of art is going to be pretty short. To be sure, it will continue to entertain, and will even be bought up briskly by those in the know. But already it is wearing a little thin. Unlike earlier artists who poked fun in their work, Jasper Johns in *Painting With Two Balls,* for example, Tansey is the only one to make parody his paintings' sole content. And this turns out to have crucial consequences for the life they lead once we have turned away from them. The manifold stylizations recede rapidly, and we are left with the bare-bones "gag" the artist starts out with.

Thus though one chuckles wryly at the humor, the ingenuity with which these "riddles" are concocted, and truly admires the sure hand that executed them, all too soon a pall sets in. Boarding the elevator, even before one is down on the street, one experiences a sensation of emptiness. There is, at the last, little to sustain one here. The paintings remain essentially one-liners, markers summarizing a changing attitude.

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Books

Tuchman's folly

by Paul Johnson

In *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam,*[1] Barbara Tuchman discusses in detail four totally different and widely separated instances in which, she argues, foolish leadership produced disaster: the Trojan acceptance of the Trojan Horse, the handling of Protestantism by the papacy in the early sixteenth century, English policy during the American Revolution, and America's conduct in Vietnam. These four instances are enveloped in a more general theoretical treatment of the role of folly in history. Thus, there are five areas in which to test the validity of the book. What I propose to do here is to examine only one of them in detail: the Vietnam experience, which (I imagine) provided Mrs. Tuchman with her chief motive in producing this work.

My old tutor A.J.P. Taylor used to say that the only lesson of history is that there are no lessons of history. If he believed that literally he would not, I think, have spent a lifetime writing and teaching history, for the object of studying history is not merely to discover what happened but to learn something about the nature of human societies, obviously with a view toward safeguarding or improving our own. To that extent I am with Mrs. Tuchman. Taylor's real point, however, was the intrinsic difficulty of discovering true lessons and the obvious risks of applying false ones. Thus, Anthony Eden came to grief over Suez in 1956 because he applied a lesson—concerning the dangers of appeasement—wrenched out of its true historical and geographical context. Mankind is on a voyage from an irrecoverable past into an unknown future. All historical situations are unique and unrepeatable; they are usually complex too, and the more closely they are observed, the less easy does it appear to draw thumping great conclusions from them which can be applied elsewhere.

Mrs. Tuchman's examination of American policy in Vietnam inclines one to endorse Taylor's scepticism. It follows the conventional, not to say threadbare, lines which the liberal media developed in the 1970s: that American involvement in Vietnam was, *ab initio,* an error which compounded itself as it increased and was certain to fail all along. She thereby falls into a trap which a historian who seeks to draw lessons from the past should be particularly careful to avoid: to assume that what in the end did happen, had to happen. The inevitability of failure in Vietnam is a bad starting point from which to begin an analysis. It presupposes the same kind of determinism which infests Marxist history and which invalidates it as an objective re-creation of the past. Mrs. Tuchman appears to believe that the Marxist form of nationalism pursued by Ho Chi Minh and his associates was bound to triumph, that it was in some metaphysical sense an irresistible force. This seems to me a dangerous posture for a historian to adopt

1 *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam,* by Barbara W. Tuchman; Knopf, 447 pages, $18.95.

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in general, and especially in this case, since she has considered only half the evidence. We do not know what happened on the other side of the hill, or how close Ho Chi Minh's enterprise came to failure, as did similar ones in Malaysia and Burma. The sources are simply not available. The Allied expedition to the Dardanelles in 1915 seemed, immediately after it was abandoned, a foredoomed failure, "inevitable"; when the Turkish sources eventually became available, they suggested it might well have succeeded, if persisted in a little longer.

Mrs. Tuchman's attachment to retrospective inevitability makes her judgment of those who failed to recognize it at the time unduly harsh, and couched in language a historian should be chary of using. Too many people are described as "rabid" or accused of "panic," "paranoia," and "hysteria." Did Churchill "rave" every time Vietnam came up, was Truman "indoctrinated," did De Gaulle throw a "tantrum"? It seems unlikely. Was Dulles "bewitched" by his own "exaggerated rhetoric"? That was certainly not the impression he gave at the time (in 1954); rather that of a hard-bitten and calculating corporation lawyer who thought he had a good case. Mrs. Tuchman encapsulates Senator Thurmond as "Neanderthal." It is sad to see a historian use a precise and useful concept of taxonomy as a term of undifferentiated abuse.

Many of Mrs. Tuchman's confusions spring from a mishandling of terms. I have always thought it a pity that Americans referred to this area as Vietnam. The original French expression "Indochina" was more valuable precisely because it was vague. It was a portmanteau term for a collection of territories roughly between China and India, which encompassed a vast array of different cultures, tribal groups, and religions. In a characteristic form of Asian imperialism, the Viets in the North had traditionally tried to impose their unitary authority on most of this area. The French interrupted this process and sought to impose a superficial administrative unity of their own; but Viet pressure was resumed

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after 1945 and, more particularly, after the final withdrawal of the West in the early 1970s. The North's recent attempts at conquest have enjoyed some success, since the Northerners are, at present, very well armed and organized, but one doubts if their presence will prove more permanent than that of the French or Americans. The notion that there were only two sides in Indochina, one of which was bound to win, is as false as the crude simplifications of those who held the "domino theory," which Mrs. Tuchman excoriates.

To complicate this misunderstanding, Mrs. Tuchman posits a largely imaginary racial conflict between East and West, based upon the crude racial categories habitual among American liberals. She accepts as an unarguable fact that France failed militarily because the French were "white" and that Americans failed in turn because "they forgot that they too were white." Leaving aside the fact that a high proportion of the French troops came from Africa and that many of the Americans were blacks, Mrs. Tuchman exaggerates the tendency among myriads of different Asian racial groups to see "whites" as the enemy, or race/color as the sole or even principal criterion of self-interest. The Japanese repeatedly tried to play the racial card in the Second World War. They never persuaded or forced more than thirty thousand Indians, for instance, to serve against Britain, and many thousand Indians preferred torture and death to changing their allegiance. More than 2,500,000 of them volunteered to fight against Japan. Of course India, on a far bigger scale than Indochina, was a huge collection of races, castes, and cultures, many of which, being minorities nationally or locally, had much to gain from rule by an impartial external power. It is impossible to understand how Britain governed four hundred million in the subcontinent with home forces which never exceeded one hundred thousand unless one grasps that it was, for the most part, rule by consent. Right to the end, the largest of the overall minorities, the Moslems, would have settled for something less than

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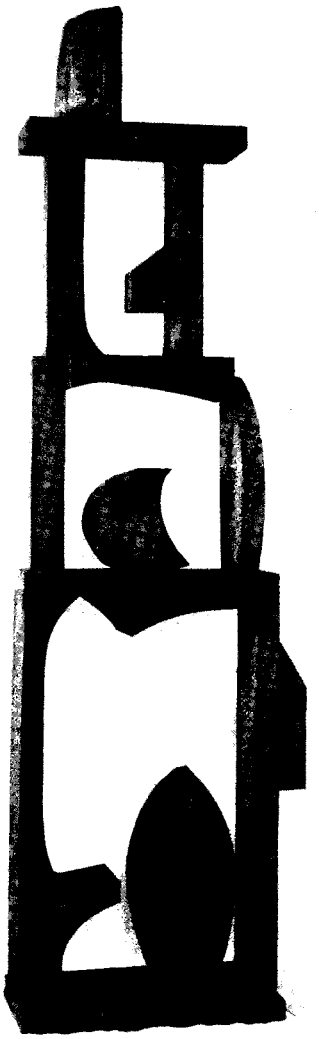

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independence. Instead, the quasi-imperialism of the upper-caste Hindus, especially the Brahmins, insisted on outright independence with its inevitable concomitant of partition.

The basis for French rule in Indochina was narrower, and they did precious little to widen it. But it was there. French rule, of a loose kind, was acceptable to many groups, especially in Laos and Cambodia, in the hill regions, and among the sects of the South and the Delta. They, and probably other groups, too, saw rule by "whites" (as Mrs. Tuchman would call it) as preferable to what they were likely to get from Northern sectarians who, they rightly guessed, would be far more repressive and far less principled. That is why they came south in such staggering numbers after the 1954 settlement gave Ho Chi Minh the North and why, since his successors got the lot in 1974, they chose exile by the million.

It is one of Mrs. Tuchman's weaknesses, springing I suppose from her determinism, that she confuses strongly motivated nationalist elites with populations as a whole. I notice that, in discussing the American Revolution, she has little to say about the so-called "loyalists" who, for a variety of reasons, preferred the King to Congress. There were a great many of them, and they included not merely "colonials" who chose exile in Canada but Indian tribes and Negro slaves. George III, in his inarticulate way, felt he represented them all, and that some of them at least were more likely to find justice in his courts than in those set up by a narrowly based "representative" legislature. The paradox of freedom and oppression marching hand in hand was not lost on Dr. Johnson, who asked "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?"

The truth—and here is a possible lesson of history Mrs. Tuchman might have considered—is that liberal empires, like the Roman, the British, and the French, are not wholly the product of the acquisitive spirit. They arise because they fulfill a need, usually because their components are not viably sovereign as separate entities. Hence unscrambling them creates as many problems as it solves—often more. It is notable that the Habsburg Empire, a collection of minorities which was liberally enough administered in its final phase, could not be dissolved into ethnic components, in 1918-19, without creating new minorities in each of them, which were far more harshly treated: if the Slav minorities were one of the chief causes of the First World War, the German minorities, especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland, were one of the causes of the Second. Of the fifty-odd independent states created in Africa, only two or three have homogeneous populations; the rest have one or more (usually many) minority problems which frequently transcend frontiers. Under the imperial system they were arbitrated by the external power or powers; with independence the only arbitration is by war—hence the scores of civil and foreign wars which have impoverished Africa since the early 1960s.

The history of Indochina has not been very different. "The longest war had come to an end," remarks Mrs. Tuchman of the final American withdrawal from Saigon. The viewpoint is obtusely Americocentric. For most of the inhabitants of Indochina the war was only just beginning, and it has continued ever since in all the component territories, with varying degrees of intensity, though we hear little about these shadowy struggles since the interest of the Western media has shifted elsewhere. The curious thing about the French and American phases of the war is that, during them, much of the country, especially Saigon and the South, flourished; living standards rose, population increased. The mass killings and the almost universal suffering produced by social engineering of the most brutal kind began only in 1974-5.

Many American advisers, who knew a great deal more about Indochina than Mrs. Tuchman evidently does, felt that this would happen, and that is the chief reason why they supported intervention, while being painfully aware of its cost and probable failure.

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They were both more altruistic, and far less foolish and ill-informed, than she makes out in her unsubtle presentation. This problem is not improved, I may add, by her perpetuation of long-exposed fallacies. It is not true, for instance, that the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 was won by Vietminh "elan and capacity" as opposed to French "modern weapons." It was won chiefly by superior artillery. Again, she is mistaken in supposing that Lyndon Johnson's bombing of the North failed because air power was inapplicable; it failed because it was subjected throughout to debilitating political criteria, as indeed was Johnson's entire conduct of the war. Perhaps one lesson of Vietnam is that war is too serious a business to be left to the politicians.

Mrs. Tuchman's account of the Vietcong Tet Offensive does not make the critical point that it was a military failure but a media victory, a point exhaustively documented in Peter Braestrup's 1977 study, *Big Story*. America's leaders were inclined to confuse media criticism with public opinion. There was indeed a failure of leadership, but not of the kind Mrs. Tuchman supposes. The leadership was neither ill-informed nor foolish; but in the end it subordinated its own better judgment to that of the media, thereby underestimating the will of the mass of the American people to sustain what it intuitively felt to be a just endeavor. It was characteristic of the leadership misconceptions that Lyndon Johnson took the March 1968 New Hampshire primary results as a vote for American withdrawal; in fact, among the anti-Johnson voters the hawks outnumbered the doves by three to two. The relationship between national leadership, media presentation, and public opinion during the Vietnam War is a fruitful area of study; there, if anywhere, the lessons of the conflict, for Americans at least, lie. But Miss Tuchman is not much interested in this aspect.

She soon sees the whole episode as an unrelieved disaster. She quotes a Michigan congressman who felt obliged to tell a couple from his constituency who had lost their son: "There was no way I could say that what had happened was in their interest or in the national interest or in anyone's interest." With that she ends her account. A historian ought to be able to do better than that. It is not at all clear that America's effort in Indochina was wholly futile. It should be judged in the perspective of the overall campaign by the United States, largely single-handed, to produce stability in south and east Asia after the Chinese landslide in 1949. Thirty-five years later the results are by no means contemptible. Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, all then at risk, remain independent, three of them relatively prosperous. In South Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, and above all in Japan, remarkably strong economies have come into existence, and these Pacific enterprise states are playing an increasing part in the stable growth of the entire world economy. The United States was not, alas, able to do the same for Indochina, even for South Vietnam. But by holding on there for the best part of two decades, America acted as a lightning conductor, attracting, concentrating, and neutralizing the thrust of forces which might have played devastingly elsewhere on the vulnerable cluster of states which compose the Asian rim. As it is, they have survived, even flourished.

It is important for the historian to look not only at what is lost but also at what is preserved. Mrs. Tuchman, in her analysis of papal policy in the sixteenth century, fails to note that the papal folly which made the Reformation inevitable was the product of the same obdurate spirit which carried through the successful Counter-Reformation, so that in the closing decades of the twentieth century the papacy still rules in the Vatican over a community of eight hundred million souls, twice the population of the entire world when Luther nailed his theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. Or again, the folly which provoked the American Revolution reflected a definition of legitimacy which, two decades later, was instrumental in enabling England to defy the

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world aims of the French Revolution and its Bonapartist successor. In the longer perspective of the twentieth century, I doubt if American intervention in Southeast Asia will be seen as a "march of folly" rather than as one of the more doubtful episodes in a global enterprise of containment which started in 1946, continues today, and which, on balance, has been wise and necessary.

Victorian love affair

Polly Longsworth, editor Austin and Mabel: The Amherst Affair and Love Letters of Austin Dickinson and Mabel Loomis Todd. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 449 pages, $24.95

reviewed by James R. Mellow

There is some element of banality in any love affair that makes it difficult for the outsider to appreciate the full force of other people's passions. Even the steamy, complicated adultery of Austin Dickinson, Emily Dickinson's beloved brother, and Mabel Loomis Todd, the wife of a professor of anatomy at Amherst College, is more interesting to read *about* in Polly Longsworth's lengthy introduction to *Austin and Mabel* than in the selection of the love letters the couple wrote during their thirteen-year affair. It is from the clandestine correspondence (a thousand or more letters and notes) as well as relevant passages from private diaries and journals that Longsworth has constructed this absorbing chronicle of one of the more revealing cases of late Victorian sexual behavior.

The affair began in 1882. Mabel Todd was twenty-five, new to Amherst, a vivacious hostess and accomplished painter, writer, and singer; Austin Dickinson was fifty-three, a married man, a respected lawyer, a trustee of the college, and a leading citizen in the community. Passion moved cautiously in those days; it was not until more than a year later, on December 13, 1883, that Austin and Mabel found sexual fulfillment behind the closed doors of the dining room in the Dickinson family home where Austin's unmarried sisters, Emily and Lavinia, lived. The couple commemorated the event with two dated slips of paper on which they braided their first names together in a code word: AMUASBTEILN. Mabel slipped hers between the pages of her diary; Austin kept his in his wallet until the day he died.

The Todd-Dickinson affair has come in for a good deal of recent attention, most notably in the first volume of Peter Gay's revisionist study of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, *Education of the Senses.* In it, Gay devotes a chapter to Mabel Todd and her "exhaustive record of her erotic life," which he regards as a boon to the social historian. The affair is intriguing on other counts as well. Both families seem to have readily cooperated in the liaison. Lavinia and Emily Dickinson, who adored their brother, approved of the relationship, seeing it as a reprieve from Austin's soured marriage and his vindictive wife. Lavinia's post-office box, number 207, served as a convenient address for Mabel's secret love letters. The reclusive Emily, equally approving, never met her brother's mistress face to face, however. On Mabel's first visit to the Homestead on Main Street, Emily listened from the shadowy hallway while Mabel sang and played the piano. By way of appreciation, she sent the young guest a glass of sherry and a poem written on the spot. Thereafter the two communicated by letter. (Austin, wanting to acquaint the two women on some more intimate basis, once considered showing Emily one of Mabel's love letters to him, "that she may know of what stuff you are," he wrote his mistress.) Emily's poems, her "letters" to the world beyond the Homestead gate, were later rescued and edited for publication by Mabel Todd. There was, it seems, something epistolary in the very nature of the Dickinson's relations with the world.

Mabel's husband, David Todd, also connived in the affair. After discussion, he had even given his blessing to Austin and Mabel's first sexual encounter. Thereafter, the

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two men, husband and lover, became friends for life. Austin visited Mabel at the Todd house—for private meetings upstairs. David, when he came home, whistled a tune from *Martha* to alert the loving pair. Mabel entertained her husband's transient mistresses as well. When she was away, visiting relatives or travelling abroad with friends, she sent her letters to her lover unsealed and undercover in her equally ardent letters to her husband. It was a cosy *ménage à trois*. All three kept journals and diaries in which they recorded or commented on their sexual activities, often using coded symbols. Even Mabel's menstrual periods were noted as a means of determining what she regarded as her safe, or "auspicious," times for intercourse. After the birth of a daughter, Millicent, in 1880, Mabel clearly wanted no more children. "I was *made* for a wife," she admitted with candid selfishness in her diary, "—for a mother, truly, *no*."

Peter Gay refers to Mabel Todd's "engaging garrulity." That trait is certainly evident in her letters. She had the gift of egocentricity and exaggeration combined. "It is of God," she writes Austin about their affair, "—true and marvelously tender and rare . . . . You understand me. You appreciate every little fineness. You bring out every truest part of my nature." His letters give the impression of a man released—voluble, easy, overflowing with enthusiasm: "I have found in you what a woman may be to a man, hope, courage, joy, inspiration, rest, peace, religion! . . . Conventionalism is for those not strong enough to be laws for themselves." Photographs present them as an ill-matched pair. (But who understands sexual attraction, anyway?) She is diminutive, with a nose that is too large and eyes that are too vivid; he looks like a giant with a shaggy mane, ugly sidewhiskers, a stony brow, and an even stonier stare. There are moments of fiery ardor in their letters, but there are also long stretches of tedium, the usual clichés and terms of endearment, the inevitable assertions that no one else in the world and time has loved as they have loved. The word love turns up so frequently that, by the end of the book, it has been worn thinner than a well-thumbed dime.

But love and passion—literary, epistolary, or otherwise—is not what one remembers most about *Austin and Mabel*. Instead, it is Longsworth's shrewd and sharply defined character studies of the four principals, including Sue Dickinson, the embittered wife who tried to use her social position to have her husband's mistress ostracized from polite society. The manner in which Longsworth weaves the themes and counterthemes—pride and physical passion, social status and private rationalization, odd psychological motivations, blatant egotism, and the sense of civic duty—among four individuals in a presumably puritanical New England community is masterful. *Austin and Mabel* is a thoroughly enlightening study of provincial life and love in nineteenth-century America, one that challenges our conventional notions about bourgeois morality and the total subjugation of women in the Victorian age.

Mabel Todd, no doubt, suffered the slights and grievances of the family warfare; she referred to Sue Dickinson as the town's "Great Black Mogul." But Amherst seems to have tolerated the adulterous affair: Austin was never banished from any of his important civic offices; Mabel continued to chaperon fraternity dances, attended Sunday services (though avoiding communion, which she did not believe in, at all costs), kept up her backroads carriage rides with her lover. As a celebrated writer and lecturer—on Emily Dickinson, and on Japan, which she had visited with her husband—she remained a respected, if not altogether respectable, figure in a community in which appearances counted, although not so much as we once believed. After Austin died in 1895, despite the misgivings of friends, Mabel, dressed in widow's black, rode around town on a fiery red Columbia bicycle that had turned up at her door on the day after Austin's death. (It was the gift of a friend.) She is another of the nineteenth-century renegade women who were not quite such exceptions to the rule, one of those lesser lives that change our opinions about an age.

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Notebook

Hastening the decline of grammar

by David Lehman

The editors of *The Atlantic* must be in a combative mood. The February issue of that venerable magazine featured, as its cover story, an excerpt from Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's aptly titled book *The Assault on Truth.* Just two months earlier an assault on traditional grammar by a Stanford University linguist named Geoffrey Nunberg made its way onto *The Atlantic*'s cover. This Geoffrey hasn't received the notice, almost universally unfavorable, that the other has managed to arouse. Nor should he. In its own quiet way, however, Nunberg's article participates in an intellectual tendency that ought to worry us far more than it has. "The Decline of Grammar" needs to be answered not only because it is wrong on particulars and wrongheaded in general but because, concealing a political agenda beneath its "nonpartisan" facade, it would hasten the condition it sets out to describe. Nunberg's logic would make literary culture a casualty of a liberal society. One takes what consolation one can in observing that what Nunberg practices is not liberalism but a debased version of same.

"The Decline of Grammar" advertises itself as "an argument for a middle way between permissiveness and traditionalism." At least these are the words that appear in italics above the title and by-line. And indeed Nunberg does make a show of evenhandedness. He presents himself as the referee in a wrestling match featuring tag teams of has-been grammarians in one corner and up-and-coming linguists in the other. But though he tends to talk about "the linguists" from the comfortable remove of the third-person plural, as though he himself were not of their number, no reader is likely to be fooled. The fight has been fixed from the start. The grammarians are depicted as "shrill" and "dogmatic" fellows, all bluster and arrogance, who simply follow rules blindly instead of "working them out." The linguists, for their part, are said to be overdoing things now and then, but they're usually right and, what's more, they have "based their attack" against traditional grammar on "sound" principles that appeal to "the public's growing respect for science and increased awareness of cultural pluralism." Surely, they've got to win. Why, all that we hold dearest stands behind them!

Nunberg doesn't like to think himself a proponent of "permissiveness." "Tolerance" is his favored euphemism. Call it what you will, his drift is clear. Linguistic expertise allied with common sense has given him his mandate to judge grammatical rules—and common violations—in a spirit of sweet reasonableness. And for the life of him he can't understand the fuss that *hopefully* kicks up. Sure, its popular usage is technically incorrect, but so what? What's wrong, for that matter, with *It's me* or *I didn't see none?* Nunberg makes the case for both of them. But he doesn't stop there. In this day and age, he argues, proper agreement between subject and verb is merely "a good exercise" and

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little else, since it "fails to serve real logic" and, besides, "there are dialects of English (as well as many other languages) that do not bother with it." Jargon isn't really bad for you. It's here to stay, isn't it? "Why," Nunberg asks, "is it all right for a politician to use *capital-intensive,* once a technical term of economics, but not *revenue enhancement*?" Budding young Orwellians are requested to refrain from pointing out that the latter is a euphemism designed to mislead. After all, Nunberg reminds us, dishonesty and obscurantism "have always been with us," and there's no stopping them now.

Onward, then, to slang. Ah, slang. What else is it but "the special language of linguistically disenfranchised groups like the young, the minorities, and the underworld"? (Let's hear it for Jack Abbott as a linguistic hero.) True slang, take it from the linguists, is beyond anyone's competence to rule on one way or the other. If it feels good, do it. And that goes for usage in general. If, say, *anyone can do what he wants* makes you feel sexist, let your conscience or the *Zeitgeist* decide. Go ahead, substitute *they* for *he.* It's okay, really. As is choosing *who* where *whom* is required. As for the distinction between *disinterested* and *uninterested,* we ought to "eliminate it from the canons of standard usage" on anti-elitist grounds if no other, the sticking point being that the few who observe the distinction (always excepting Professor Nunberg) tend to congratulate themselves on their sapience. Such smugness won't do.

Implicit in all this is Nunberg's assumption that the process of linguistic change, like a Marxist's notion of history, is "as ineluctable and impersonal as continental drift," an inexorable force that it would be futile to resist. Nor is grammar the only thing to have declined as language marches on to its manifest destiny. Literature, too, has fallen by the wayside. "There is no canon—no books that everyone expects everybody to have read, or to be able to pretend to have read," Nunberg wryly reports. True to form, he issues no protest about this; either he genuinely doesn't think that there's anything wrong or his diffidence will not

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permit him to make a moral judgment. The trend away from books is "irreversible," he says. "Few are literate in the high sense of the word."

So what's to be done? Let's be reasonable. If the written word has lost its authority, canonical or otherwise—if literacy itself has changed its meaning on us—don't we look foolish appealing to books as guides on grammar and diction and usage and style? "Instruction in speaking and listening, where it is given at all, still tends to take as its model the Lincoln-Douglas debates, rather than *The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour,*" Nunberg says rather mournfully, perhaps because a diet of the latter would help to build up one's "tolerance." In short, to be "democratic" about it, we must "accord more importance to the spoken language." And what do we find when we look? "In friendly conversation, we scatter dangling modifiers at will and stick in a *this* or an *it* whose referent is nowhere spoken but is easily recovered against the familiar background." The operative word here is "friendly." Nunberg likes to take a friendly approach toward the barbarisms and solecisms and improprieties he examines. He does his best, in fact, to appear positively cheerful. "There is no more hard evidence for a general linguistic degeneration," he announces at the outset, "than there is reason to believe that Aaron and Rose are inferior to Ruth and Gehrig" —a judgment with which it would be very hard to concur if one truly believed that what Nunberg calls the decline of literature is a *fait accompli,* to be followed in time by its fall.

Inconsistencies of one sort or another crop up frequently in "The Decline of Grammar." Having established that "every language is a complex system with an internal logic," Nunberg can still turn around and invoke the French language on questions of English syntax. (There's nothing like a liberating look at the French when you're wondering whether it's all that important to use the nominative case after *to be.*) Why with "those old bugbears *who* and *whom*" does Nunberg counsel a lenient attitude? Impartial as ever, he first calls Lionel Trilling to the witness stand. It seems that, in defense of the distinction, Trilling wrote that getting *who* and *whom* straight gives evidence of mental discipline; it "tends to build character." Nunberg's rejoinder is quick in coming. "The trouble is that we really don't need that much character when writing or reading modern prose." The distinction, he adds, may once have had its value, but no longer. "It requires much more planning of the structure of the sentence to write like Johnson or Arnold than it does to write like Hemingway or to compose an op-ed piece for the *Times.*" The statement sells modern prose short. It assumes that Hemingway's syntactical simplicity is universal, but it neither is nor should be. On the other hand, if the decline of literature doesn't alarm you terribly much, perhaps it's just as well to discourage students from attempting to read or write a prose more demanding than that of your average op-ed column.

It is characteristic of Nunberg's argument that, his professed faith in our linguistic health notwithstanding, he assumes that things are worse than they are. These days, he writes, "a composition teacher would not dare to reduce a student's grade on the grounds that his metaphors were flat, or that his sentences were choppy, though correct." It may come as news to Nunberg, but thousands of college instructors persist in doing just that and generally without first asking themselves "do I dare?" At last report, it remained a shared conviction of embattled English departments around the land—even, in all likelihood, at Nunberg's own university—that good grammar is indispensable to what the fat man in *The Maltese Falcon* called "plain speaking and clear understanding."

Nunberg comes up with some perfunctory praise for the "great moralists" of the past, from Swift to Orwell, who held prose to be "a moral accomplishment." But those who would extend this tradition get the back of Nunberg's hand. John Simon, for one, is dismissed on account of his "conservative

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ideology," as though politics had no place in the discussion. Nunberg's "nonpartisan" ideal, however, doesn't prevent him from endorsing a crude (and common) misapplication of liberal orthodoxy. "The doctrines of prescriptive grammar reflect covert class prejudice and racism," he avers, identifying linguistic propriety as a form of oppression. One needn't be a conservative ideologue to reply that wisdom bids us to educate the illiterate rather than to glorify their condition. It takes, in fact, little knowledge of modern linguistics, and no particular political bias, to arrive at this conclusion. What's required, rather, is an assertion of moral will —a refusal to acquiesce in what looks like an inevitability only if we suppose that nothing can be done to change things for the better. First, however, we must recognize, as Nunberg doesn't, that a decline in standards does constitute a problem and that our language with its grammatical logic makes demands on us that we ignore at our peril.

No amount of sophisticated linguistic analysis will enable the critic to hear what's wrong with the vulgar use of *hopefully*. But if you have a sense of aesthetic right and wrong, if you trust your ear, if you can tell the difference between *A thing of beauty is a joy forever* and *A pretty bauble always gladdens us,* you'll know that a choice of words is fundamental to the way we live, think, and perceive the world around us. "How," Yeats asked, "can we know the dancer from the dance?" No more than we can separate a language from the grammar that makes it what it is or from the literature that is its glory. To dismiss a rule because its logic eludes one argues a deficiency in the critic, not in the language. Use a plural verb with a singular noun, take the laws of language into your own hands, and it's as though you had elected to play a game of chess without accepting the assigned position of the pieces and their given patterns of movement. The result is anarchy.

When all is said and done, there appears to be a limit even to Nunberg's tolerance. Grammar may be old hat and all that, but he has no intention of breaking the rules him-

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self. Not by accident did "The Decline of Grammar" appear in *The Atlantic,* a magazine that edits its copy with the same fierce scrupulousness for which *The New Yorker* is renowned. (*The Atlantic*'s editor, William Whitworth, is in fact a *New Yorker* veteran whose name gets bruited about when insiders talk about possible successors to William Shawn.) One wonders, therefore, about the seriousness with which author and publisher put their claims. On a subject that brings out wit and verve from more overtly partisan types, Nunberg writes a painfully correct if basically colorless prose, flavored with an occasional simile though free of anything too salty. But correct it certainly is.

And perhaps that's the real tip-off. The contradiction between Nunberg's conservative prose and his radical conclusions, the inconsistency between his means and his ends, suggests a failure of confidence somewhere along the line. Consider his treatment of *I can't cope* and like locutions. "Asking middle-class critics to rule on such matters," says Nunberg, dipping into his bag of baseball similies, "is like asking me as a linguist to pronounce on whether Frank Robinson uses *squeeze play* correctly." The analogy, though it plays to the grandstands, doesn't work—except as one more indication that, for all his expertise, the speaker is just a friendly, self-effacing chap. Yet we're asked to entrust our language to him—and to others who proclaim their limitations as virtues. No matter that some linguists, by Nunberg's own admission, "regard prose as a necessary evil." The future is theirs nevertheless. And here Nunberg trots out another analogy that, in its very inexactness, reveals more than it intends. "It is impossible to talk intelligently about the language nowadays without having an idea of what the program of modern linguistics is all about, in the same way that it is impossible to talk intelligently about the economy without an idea of what it is that economists do." Bosh. The birds may not know much about ornithology, but we listen to them if it's their song that we prize. Let us, by all means, leave linguistics to the realm of the social sciences—and our language to the Audens and Merrills, the Nabokovs and Updikes, who live by their words.

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Mme Pierre Monteux

by Samuel Lipman

A *New York Times* obituary at the end of March told the world of the death of a remarkable woman. Under the headline "Doris Hodgkins Monteux, Singer and Music Memoirist," the short article describes her as the author of two books about music, a singer, the co-founder of the Domaine School for Conductors, and the widow of the great French conductor Pierre Monteux.

Here, surely, is a case where such facts mean little, and, taken together, tell no story at all. Her books on music, although entertaining, are trifling—one is a view of her husband from their poodle's point of view. Her singing was an affair of limited scope that took place sixty years ago and more.

The obituary was on firmer ground in mentioning her role in *L'École Monteux,* as the conducting school was often known. But even here the mention pales beside the reality. It was as a student at this peculiar institution, artificially planted each August for four weeks in the isolated Maine hamlet of Hancock, that one could best know Doris Monteux. The reality made plain there was that she was not just a co-founder of the school: she was its very life. She raised money for the school and selected the students; she arranged their housing with local families and oversaw their feeding in the French restaurant run by her son (by an earlier marriage) and daughter-in-law.

All this activity went on more or less behind the scenes. Publicly, Doris Monteux—"Mum" to the students—was the unquenchable performer responsible for announcing the program at the Sunday afternoon concerts. Here, in a mixture of New England oratorio-style staginess and down-East folksiness (leavened by hilariously mal-accented snippets from French and Italian) she brought the classics home to her audience. Her manner could be arch and pretentious, full of do-gooding, but finally that didn't matter: one knew that the great composers were her friends and that the members of the audience were her friends and that Doris loved playing the marriage broker.

Sometimes she did get carried away, though. She once wrote and orated a proclamation announcing the selection of a Monteux "disciple"—a conductor who through his talent and study with the master had earned the right to carry on the hallowed name. I can well remember the opening of the little speech: "Great men since the days of our Lord have always chosen their disciples."

She performed on her private stage as well. A Catholic convert, she read widely in devotional literature, not always taking care to separate herself from what she was reading about. On one occasion I heard her say, while she was reclining on a chaise longue and eating chocolates, "Don't I remind you of Saint Thérèse de Lisieux?"

But to leave matters with these anecdotes would be to traduce Doris Monteux as badly as did the *Times* by describing her as "singer

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and music memoirist." For her distinction lay not in being a musician or writer, or a homespun character quaintly inhabiting the great world. Her true genius lay in being a conductor's wife. In this very public role she was an exemplar of a vanishing species: the woman without whom a man would amount to very little.

Nowadays we see Pierre Monteux as the mighty man on the podium in the historic 1913 Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. But in this performance, after all, he was only a ballet conductor, and even though he did follow Karl Muck as conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1919, his tenure there was short and hardly sweet. He met Doris in Boston and they went to Europe in the 1920s, eventually marrying in 1927. Here she began her work of making him a major figure. She had absolute confidence in his brilliance, and he must always have felt secure in the boundless strength of her admiration.

One example of her resolutely aggressive behavior has been widely recounted. Monteux had been conducting the Amsterdam Concertgebouw during the Depression. He wasn't getting paid on time and he desperately needed the money. One night, after he had conducted the first half of the concert and returned, as usual, to his dressing room to wait out the intermission, Doris suddenly locked him inside. She stationed herself outside the door and demonstratively put the key in her bodice. She then called for the orchestra manager and told him that the concert would not resume until the check arrived. It soon did. She opened the door, and Monteux marched out to conduct the rest of the performance.

In San Francisco, where Monteux managed to raise the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra from provincial to international rank, Doris Monteux was a master at dealing with the several patronesses who ran the music scene there. She treated them as great ladies and they loved it. But she never made herself so familiar that they forgot the distance that must separate the artist from his supporters, and the art from its audience.

As Pierre Monteux grew more famous, his wife dealt increasingly with managers and the press. And as he grew more feeble in the years before his death in 1964, she devoted herself to making an environment, whether at home or on the road, where his strength could be conserved. She was always there to take some of the pressures off him, to do for him everything that he did not have to do himself. She protected without fail his time for study and reflection, and she screened with an often brutal hand the visitors who thought more of themselves than of her husband's musical work.

Doris Monteux wasn't perfect. She was something of a spendthrift and she could be both manipulative and shrewish. But she never took her eye off the ball: to make it possible for her husband—and, ultimately, for both of them together—to present great music in great performance. There, indeed, is her obituary.

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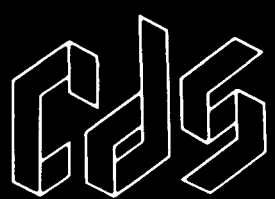

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Letters

To the Editors:

Herb Greer, in his "Letter from London" (December, 1983), has seriously misrepresented the facts about the burning of David Mach's rubber-tire submarine *Polaris.* That part of Mr. Greer's article reads as an example of his own category, i.e., "rash gestures under the influence of ideology," the ideology here being a belief in the necessity of discovering an underlying social or political message in every purported or actual art work—Socialist Realism's alter ego, in fact. This false ideology leads him to exalt the destroyer of an artwork and to suppress the name of the artist himself—and in the month before 1984!

The facts are these: David Mach, aged twenty-seven, built *Polaris* out of about ten thousand used car tires with the help of his wife, friends, and a band of supportive art students. He did this as one of fifty sculptors, all selected on behalf of the Arts Council of Great Britain to show their work at a very large exhibition, in galleries and out-of-doors, held in London last August.

The tires were donated and the only cost was for the hire of transport to carry them. He was not "prompted by—CND sympathies" but was driven by his wish to make a beautiful thing. This he did wonderfully well. *Polaris,* upon its completion, was awesome and resplendent, and indeed a work of art. That it was made of used tires and not of black basalt is immaterial.

Before the work's completion, the London *Daily Express* published a derogatory article about the work under the false banner, "And it costs an amazing £50,000 of your money!" Thus a number of people became angry at what seemed to be the profligate expenditure of public money. The disturbed person who set fire to the work and tragically to himself was one of these. He was unhappy and embittered by lack of success in his chosen field of furniture design. His vandalism was clearly provoked by the inflammatory article.

I write with passion because I am an admirer of David Mach's work and helped to finance the prototype of *Polaris,* built on a smaller scale, which enabled the selectors of the sculpture show to choose it. It is very sad when a newspaper can propagate false ideas and lead to the destruction of art without any protest being heard.

Tom Bendhem
London, England

Herb Greer replies:

But this is a serious matter! Mr. Bendhem is accusing me of lying about his protegé. He also indicts me as a believer in the "necessity [sic] of discovering a political or social message in 'every' purported or actual work of art." For God's sake, he implies that I get all my information from the *Daily Express*! I would sue if I could afford it; as it is, I will mention a few facts which Mr. Bendhem himself has suppressed.

Let me agree that the purported work of art in question was selected "on behalf" of the Arts Council. But by whom? Mr. Bendhem does not say. That is very naughty of him, because he knows the answer as well as I do. The outside exhibits were sponsored and paid for by the Arts Department of the Greater London Council, a radically left-wing body which supports CND

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loudly and enthusiastically; has declared London a nuclear-free zone; has plastered anti-nuclear posters all over London, some of them not far from the site of the purported work of art in question; and mounted an elaborate pro-Soviet exhibition not a hundred yards from the site of the purported work of art in question.

I observe Mr. Bendhem's failure to deny that his protegé holds CND sympathies. Forgive me, but that looks like an admission that he does hold them.

Now, it may be that a representation of a Polaris submarine had nothing whatever to do with any of this. Far be it from me to accuse a distinguished arts patron of lying. But I am bound to say that the evidence does cast reasonable doubt on Mr. Bendhem's over-generalized and—as far as they concern me—vicious assertions.

Finally, I would suggest that Mr. Bendhem, once his rage has subsided, go back to my piece and read *all* of the first paragraph. He will see that Gore-Graham—the man who set fire to *Polaris* and himself—called himself a fool and that I agreed with this. The term "tragic culture-hero" was ironic—although admittedly this is difficult to understand without a sense of humor.

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Current exhibitions *by Eric Gibson*
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A response to "The MLA centennial follies" *from Helen Vendler,* with a reply *by Hilton Kramer*
Robert Wilson in Minneapolis *by Samuel Lipman*

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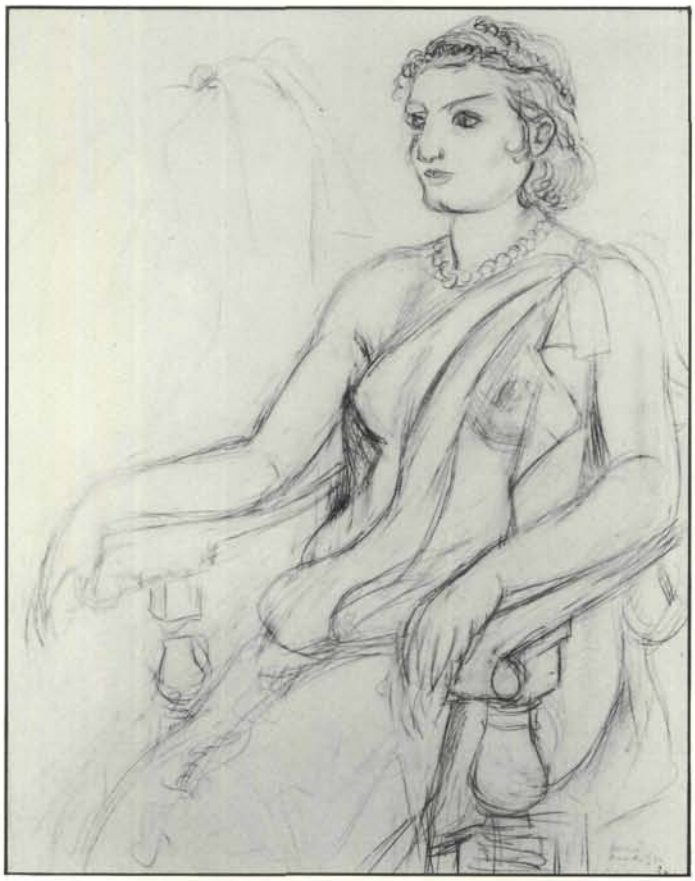
EUROPEAN MASTER DRAWINGS

CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL ART EXPOSITION MAY 10-15

MATISSE: "CIRCE", 1934, PENCIL, 20 × 14½ INCHES



MATISSE, GIACOMETTI, BALTHUS AND MATTA

BECKMANN, GROSZ AND CORINTH

ALLAN FRUMKIN GALLERY 50 WEST 57TH ST. NEW YORK

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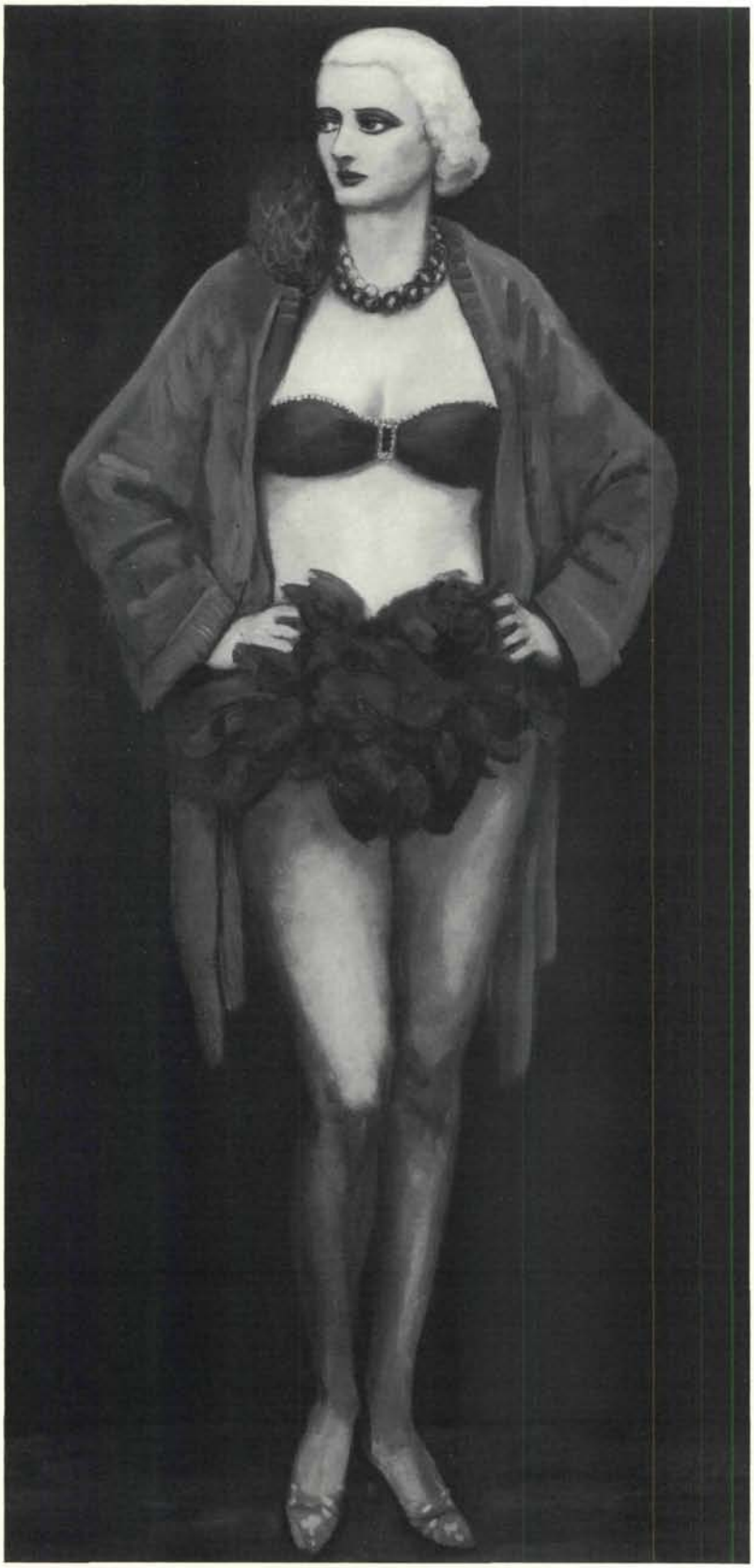

Walt Kuhn

(1877-1949)

The estate of Walt Kuhn is jointly represented by the Barridoff Galleries and the Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

May 1 to June 30

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SYBIL, 1932
Oil on canvas, 68 x 33 inches

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Paintings
April 27–May 23
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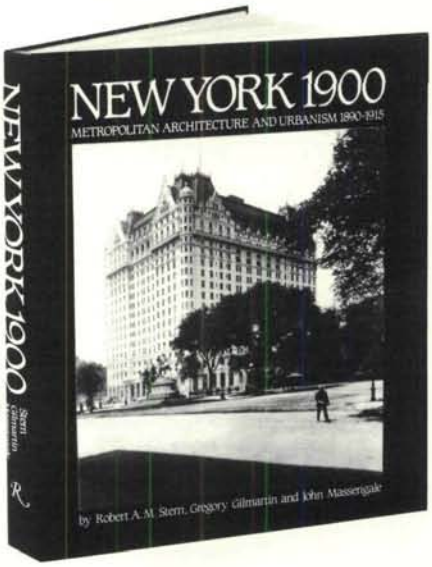
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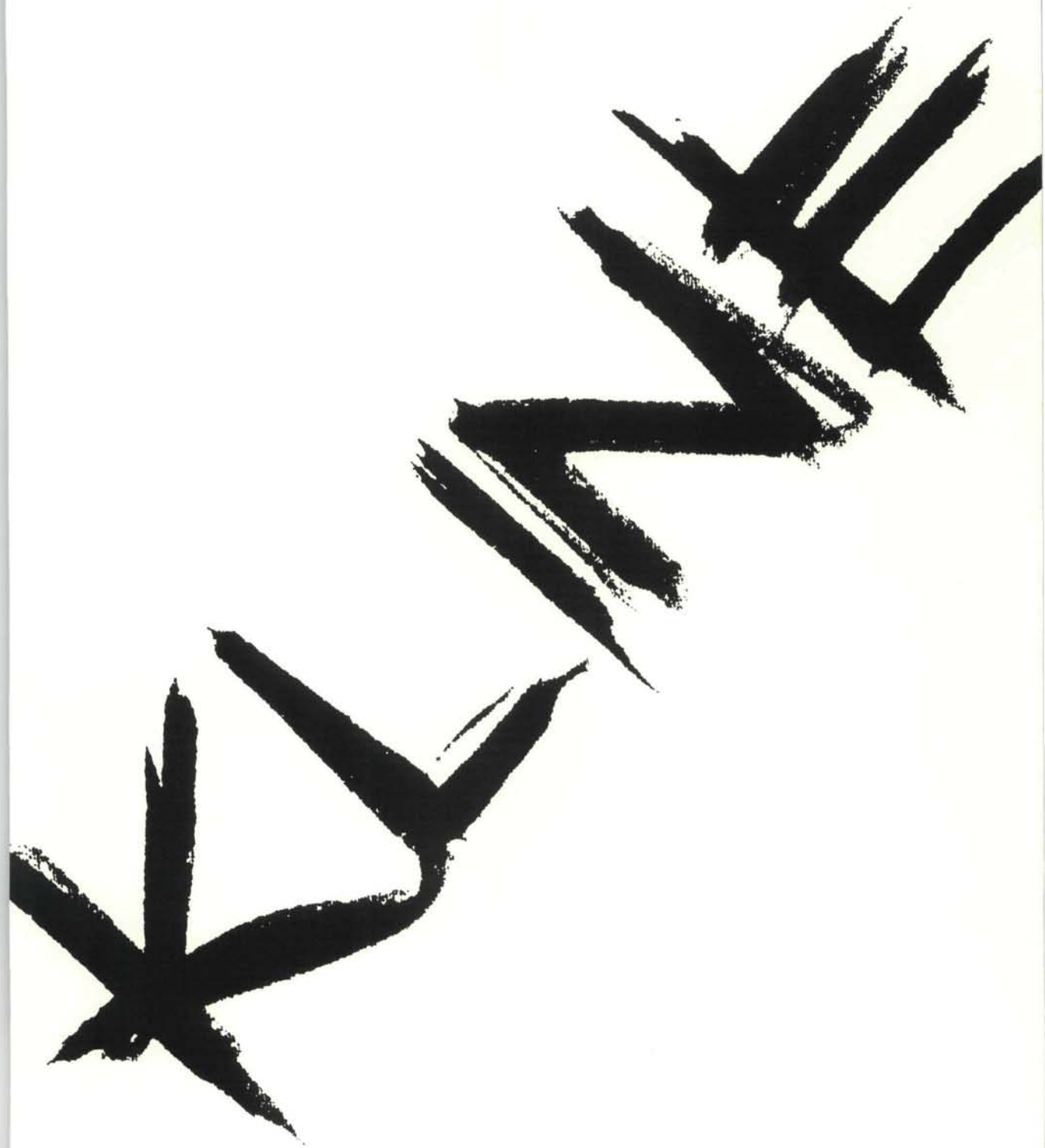

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